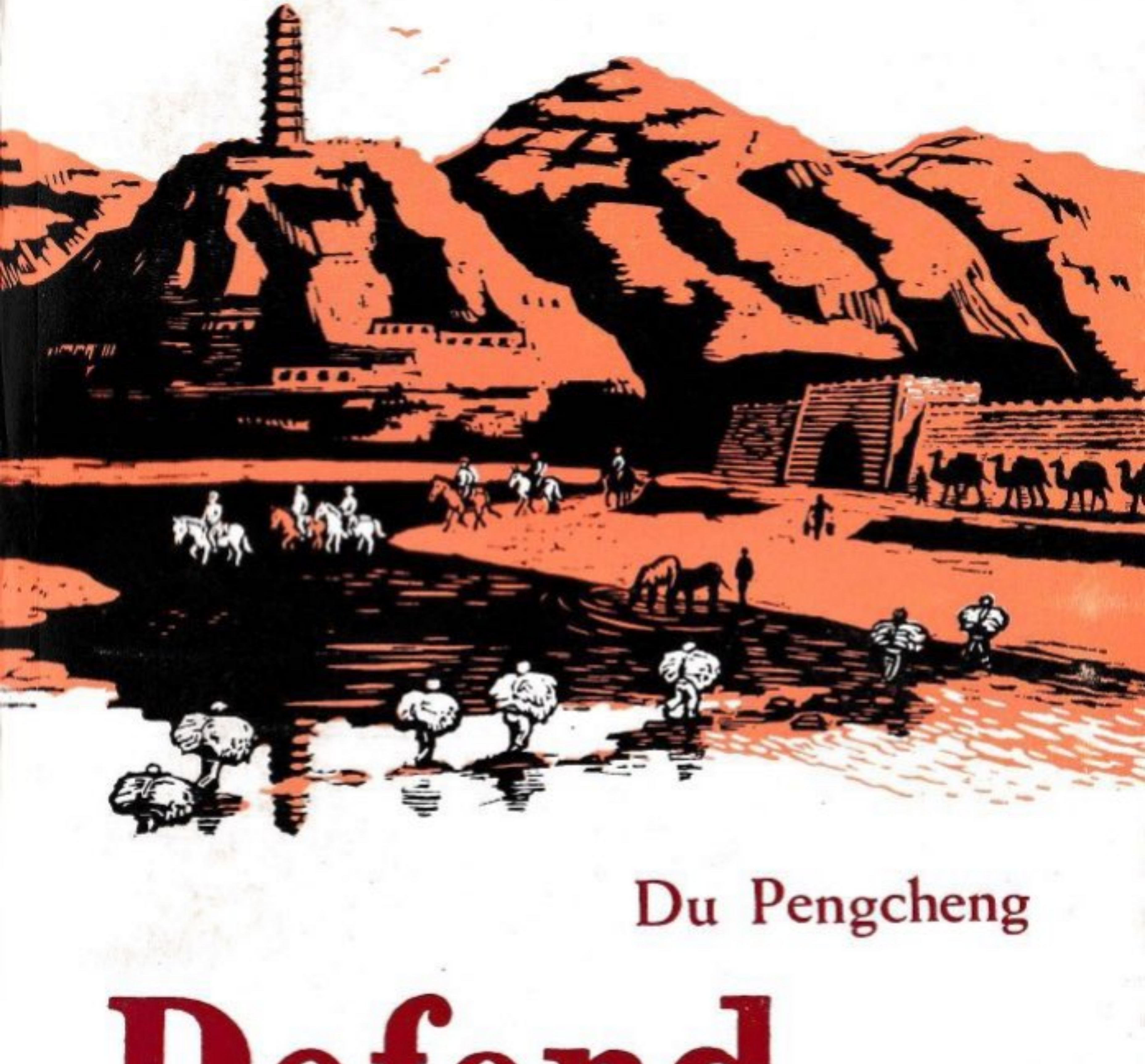
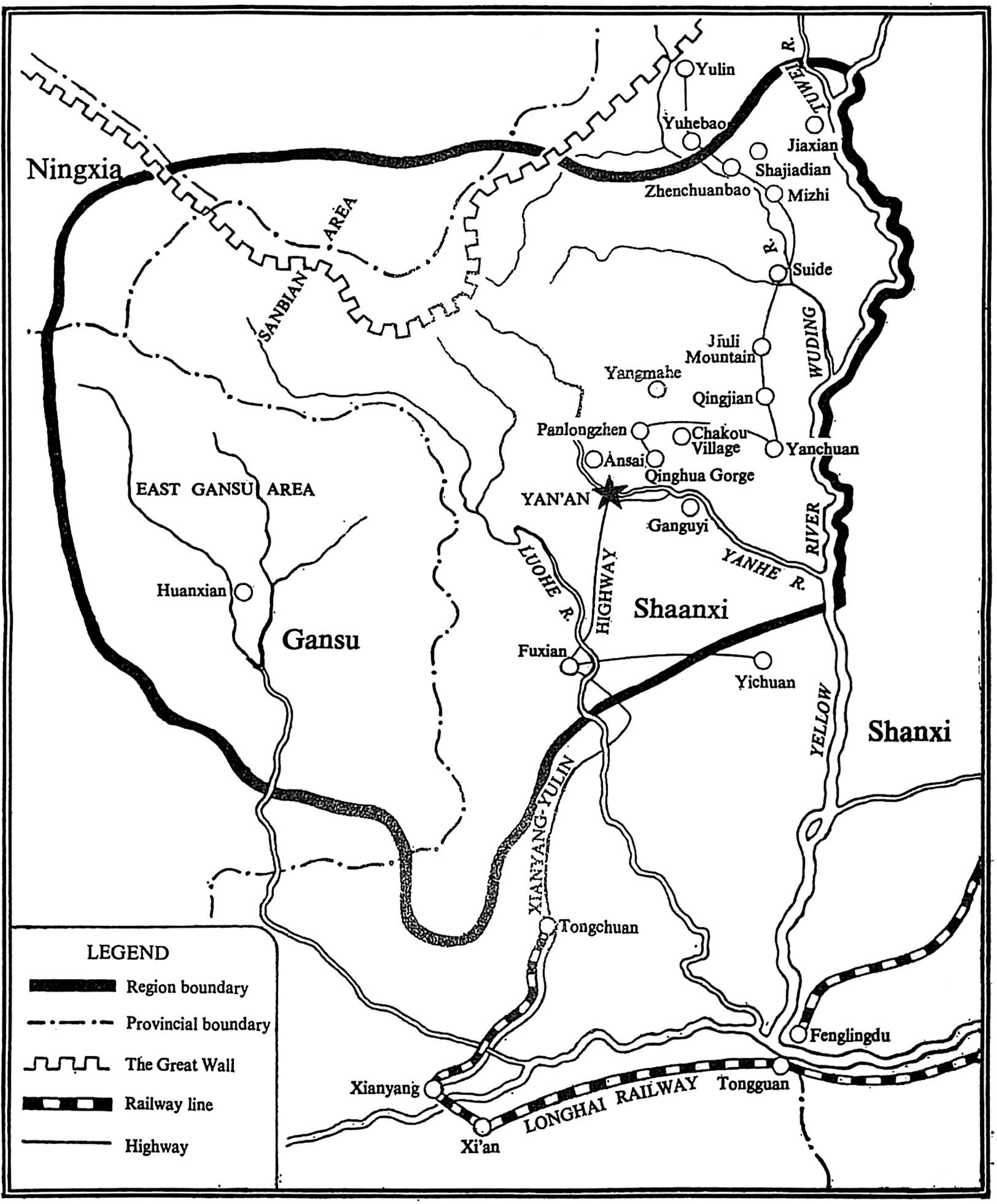
MODERN CHINESE LITERATURE



Du Pengcheng

Defend YANAN

Map of Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region


Yulin
Yuhebao
Jiaxian
Shajiadian
Zhenchuanbao
Mizhi
TUWEI R.
Ningxia
SANBIAN AREA
R.
Suide
WUDING
Jiuli Mountain
Yangmahe
Qingjian
Panlongzhen
Chakou Village
Yanchuan
Ansai
Qinghua Gorge
YAN'AN
Ganguyi
RIVER
YANHE R.
EAST GANSU AREA
Huanxian
LUOHE R.
HIGHWAY
Shaanxi
Gansu
Fuxian
Yichuan
YELLOW
Shanxi
XIANYANG-YULIN
Tongchuan
Fenglingdu
Xianyang
LONGHAI RAILWAY
Tongguan
Xi'an
LEGEND
Region boundary
Provincial boundary
The Great Wall
Railway line
Highway

Defend Yanan

Du Pengcheng

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Contents

Chapter One
Yanan 1

Chapter Two
Panlongzhen 65

Chapter Three
On the East Gansu Plateau 140

Chapter Four
At the Great Wall 207

Chapter Five
Shajiadian 291

Chapter Six
Enemy Debacle 365

Chapter One

Yanan

1

THE Lüliang Mountains were still a mass of snow and ice in early March 1947. A howling north-west wind swirled in across the white misty peaks. The dull yellow rays of the sun shining through the bare branches of the trees cast mottled reflections on the snow. In the frigid ravines, big icicles hung like a curtain from the sides of the cliffs.

Long lines of soldiers, mounted men, animals laden with small cannon, moved across the mountain-tops and through the valleys, directly into the cutting gale. Men stuffed handfuls of snow into their mouths as they marched; some sucked small icicles chopped from the cliffsides with their bayonets. The soldiers had slept out in the snow the previous night; their grey cotton-padded uniforms, frozen stiff, crackled with every step they took.

This was a column (equivalent to an army) of the PLA — the People's Liberation Army. It had left central Shanxi Province under orders and was pushing west as fast as it could travel. Like the people's soldiers on every front, from the day the People's Liberation War began, these men had been fighting steadily for over eight months without a let-up. The battle they were hurrying to commence was going to prove much crueler than any they had previously taken part in, and would be fought in much more desolate surroundings.

Rifles seldom leaving the men's shoulders, the horses never unsaddled, the column had been proceeding at a forced march for ten days. Now it had reached the east bank of the Yellow River.

On either side of the river rose towering cliffs. To the men who gazed up from the river's edge, the sky seemed a long stretch of fluttering ribbon. Perhaps if you stood on one of the cliff-tops the clouds would sail past your face; if you put out your hand you could touch the frozen blue heavens. In the chasm, the turbid yellow water churned huge chunks of ice and pounded them thunderously against the precipitous crags lining both banks. The river emitted a chill that was stifling as a fog. It crept into the marrow of your bones; it penetrated your very blood vessels. No wonder the old boatmen in these parts said you had to wear fleece-lined coats here even in summer!

The advance units of the column had assembled at the mouth of the gorge where it met the river, and began preparing to cross. Five or six American-made fighter planes, marked with the insignia of Chiang Kai-shek's KMT (Kuomintang) army, wheeled overhead, diving and strafing. Rifle fire and the smell of powder, added to the roar of the river, gave the impression that the battlefield was just ahead. The men were quiet, tense.

Chen Xingyun, brigade commander, rode his horse at a fast trot out of the mouth of the gorge, then reined sharply when he found the Yellow River in front of him. The big, sleek, chestnut stallion shook the sweat from its body, pricked up its ears, and whinnied at the sight of the tumbling water. Flicking its tail, the horse swayed its head and pawed the ground with its front hoofs, as if it would clear the river in one leap the moment Chen slackened his reins.

Brigadier Chen jumped from his mount and handed the animal over to the messenger who had been following behind him. Walking forward a few paces, Chen cast a practised eye at the surrounding mountains. Then, with hands folded across his abdomen, he stood gazing at the turbulent waves.

Regimental chief of staff Wei Yi and battalion political instructor Zhang Pei walked out of the gorge to stand beside him.

Wei Yi and Zhang Pei made an interesting contrast. Square-faced and bushy-browed, the dignified Wei Yi was a credit to the big men of Shandong with his height, solidity and broad shoulders. Zhang Pei was a head shorter, frail, his face thin and pallid. The political instructor had been wounded in eight different engagements and had lost a lot of blood. He was not very strong. From the look of him it was hard to believe that he had been through ten years of battles.

"The number of times we've crossed this river, in one direction or the other! The Yellow River is our old friend." Chen spoke in the cheerful, direct tone of voice that Wei Yi and Zhang Pei were accustomed to hearing from him.

Wei Yi shrugged slightly. "The fact that we've had many meetings with the Yellow River is nothing to get annoyed about."

Chen laughed. "Who said it was?" He turned to Zhang Pei. "You're still the same. Never have much to say."

"My habits are hard to change," replied Zhang Pei, "and my progress is slow."

"Nonsense! You've got a fine disposition. The men in your battalion probably consider you a sort of mother. Right?"

Zhang Pei smiled. "I'd be happy if that's how they really felt about me."

"We've been driving ahead, day and night," said Chen. "Can you take it?"

"I've got no kick coming. I have a horse to ride. It's the men who have it tough."

The brigadier knew the answer very well, but he asked anyhow. "Wei Yi, does Zhang Pei ride that horse during the marches?"

Wei Yi was embarrassed. He hunched his shoulders a trifle. "He always gives it to one of the men with bad legs."

Chen frowned. "I'm tired of having to keep talking about this!"

Zhang Pei knew the reason for Chen's dissatisfaction. Half a month before, the political instructor had still been lying in a hospital bed. His chest wound had healed, but his health was very poor. When he heard that the army was going to fight on the west side of the Yellow River, Zhang Pei began pleading that he be allowed to return to his unit ahead of time. The day before the column set out, he arrived back at the battalion. During the past few days of forced march, every time they met Chen had said, "You're in rotten shape. Why were you in such a hurry to return?"

The five or six enemy planes, circling above the river, dropped a few clusters of small bombs, took a strafing run, then screamed up into the clouds, out of sight.

"Every minute counts," said Chen grimly. "The situation is serious in the north-west. Extremely serious."

He said that in other places the enemy had been forced to take the defensive. In Shandong and in the north-west provinces they were trying to retaliate with what they called "concentrated attacks on important points." They were attacking in Shandong with several hundred thousand men. ". . . Here in our north-west," Chen said, "the enemy has mustered over 300,000 troops, and is using two-thirds of them on the front lines. Warlord Hu Zongnan is moving north up the Xianyang-Yulin Highway and to its east with 150,000 men, with Yanan as their objective. In the west, Ma Hongkui and Ma Bufang, warlord allies of Chiang Kai-shek, are driving on our East Gansu Area and the Sanbian Area. In the north, Kuomintang troops in and around the city of Yulin are getting ready to attempt to take Suide and Mizhi — both county seats. . . ."

Wei Yi and Zhang Pei observed the granite cast of Chen's features. That was how he always looked when they were about to launch an offensive.

The brigadier stared at the forbidding mountains on the other side of the river. "Comrades," he said in a low, heavy voice, "a real test lies ahead of us."

"Defend the Central Committee!"

"Defend Chairman Mao!"

"Defend Yanan!"

The shouts of the men blended with the boom of the Yellow River waves into a mighty roar. A roar like a sudden storm in the middle of the night — with thunder and lightning and wind and rain.

Brigadier Chen, Wei Yi and Zhang Pei looked back. In the mouth of the gorge the troops were holding battle rallies.

Standing before one of the companies was a man who was evidently its commander. His chest distended, waving his fist in the air, he was shouting, "We're going to cross the river right away, comrades. This very minute, the enemy is attacking Yanan. Yanan, comrades, the place where our Party's Central Committee and Chairman Mao have been living for more than ten years. . . ."

The eyes of the men fastened on the mountains west of the river. Several soldiers stood up, then sat down again. They seemed to want to say something.

"Who is that?" asked Chen, pointing at the speaker. "Ah, of course, Zhou Dayong." He looked at Wei Yi and Zhang Pei. "Yes, we must keep explaining to the men the significance of this Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region campaign whenever there's a chance." He thought for a moment, then went on. "The road ahead is hard. But we must make this especially clear to the men: The Central Committee and Chairman Mao are here in the north-west directing our battle personally. That is the surest guarantee of victory! All right, then. Start organizing the men for the crossing immediately. I'm going to see whether the general has arrived yet."

The wind blowing in from the desert beyond the Great Wall filled the air with fine particles of yellow sand. It billowed the clothing of the soldiers moving up into the mouth of the gorge and struck their faces with stinging force.

Waves whipped up by the gale pounded against the cliffs, flinging a drenching spray.

The river bank became crowded with men, horses and pack animals preparing for the crossing. There was a clamour of men shouting, animals whinnying.

Unit commanders rushed about getting things ready. Liu Yuanxing, First Battalion C.O., waving his cap, yelled to his messenger:

"I want the commander of First Company. Bring him here, on the double!"

The messenger was off like a streak. Two or three minutes later, he came trotting back with Zhou Dayong, whose Mauser pistol bounced on his hip as he ran. The young commander steadied it with his left hand. Reaching Liu, Dayong drew his heels together and saluted, then stood calmly waiting for orders. Well-proportioned, with broad shoulders, a bit over medium height, Dayong had a square face and a pair of stubborn eyes flashing beneath wide black brows.

"These Lüliang Mountains are cold," said Liu, rubbing his hands together. "And the banks of the Yellow River are even colder."

"Jump up and down a few times, commander," said Dayong. "That'll put fire into your veins."

"Too old for tricks like that. Now if I were your age, and had your iron constitution, I could jump into an icy pit and never fear the cold!"

Dayong laughed. "You're only thirty-four."

"I've still been eating ten years longer than you, comrade."

Liu looked across the tumbling waves at the enemy planes savagely diving and strafing beyond the opposite bank. "Sons of bitches. Do they think that will stop us? Dayong, your First Company will lead the crossing."

"That's the order we've been hoping for." Dayong's eyes gleamed.

The battalion commander glanced at his watch. "It's now two p.m. Brigade C.O.'s order is — the whole brigade must be across before dusk. All right. Bring your company here at once."

"Right." Dayong saluted and turned to go.

"Not so fast. After your company gets across, set up anti-aircraft positions on the mountain-top opposite us." Liu pointed at the planes. "Those wretches are scared of their own shadow. Give 'em a couple of bursts from your machine-guns and they'll really fly high. Ah, see there? The boats have come. Go and bring your men up here in a hurry."

2

AFTER the column crossed the Yellow River it travelled west in the direction of Yanan.

The troops continued marching straight through the night. The next day, the 18th of March, they were pushing through Yanchuan County. Although 60 miles from Yanan, the place had the atmosphere of battle. Officials of the local people's government were shipping the contents of the public granary to safer places, so that nothing would be left for the enemy. Women and old men were caching all useful household and farming equipment. Children stood as lookouts at crossroads and entrances to villages. Armed with rifles and red-tasselled spears, squad after squad of local self-defence units marched down the road — evidently on the way to carry out their manoeuvres.

The PLA men hurried on. Messages written on walls of little temples, on sides of cliffs, caught their eye. Said one:

> *Commanders, soldiers, and service personnel of the border region armies. You are about to take a most glorious stand. The eyes of all China, of the people of the whole world, are upon you. The Chinese people entrust you with their most important hopes. Now is the time to put into practice all that Chairman Mao and Commander-in-Chief Zhu De have taught you!*

The flames of war are beginning to burn in the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region, Dayong, commander of First Company, thought to himself, very agitated.

The region was about 250 miles from east to west and 300 from north to south. Dayong had seen almost every city and town, every valley and stream, in this mountainous area. He and the local peasants had been through some hard days together. He had helped them spread fertilizer and gather crops in the Wuding River valley. On the banks of the Yanshui, they had told him tales of the Land Revolution in north Shaanxi.

Yanan and north Shaanxi were as dear to him as his native village. When he was a child no taller than a rifle, he had followed the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army on its famous 8,000-mile Long March that ended in north Shaanxi. Later, the Red Army had been reorganized into the Eighth Route Army and, like many other Red Army fighters, weeping, he put his beloved cap with its red star into his knapsack, and went off to fight the Japanese invaders. In the past ten years, he and many of his battle companions had been in and out of north Shaanxi and the city of Yanan several times.

Today, he was again heading for Yanan. But this time was different, for now the flames of war were burning here, they were licking close to the home of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. The thought was painful, infuriating, unbearable. Though he had faced death often and had seen many tragic things in battle, nothing had ever shaken and angered him so intensely. It was like coming home to his ancestral village and finding bandits murdering his own mother!

On the morning of the 19th as the sun was rising behind the eastern hills, the column entered the long valley leading to Yanan, 35 miles due west. A thick pall of dust hung in the valley, for it was crowded with peasants — walking, in carts, astride little donkeys. Women carried children on their backs, old ladies bore bundles and live chickens, old men shouldered farm implements, bedding, clothing. . . . No one spoke, no one looked at anyone else. It was as if they were all strangers. Once in a while, some turned their dust-covered faces to look back at the sky above Yanan. Everyone was plainly exhausted and distressed.

The peasants were all very upset, but the moment they saw their own army arriving they became calm and sat down by the roadside. They were sure that the PLA would finish off the enemy as quick as a flash, and that the fighting would end and peaceful days would return once more.

Mothers carrying children beamed. The peasants broke into excited conversation.

"Ah, just look at our men and horses — so many! There's nothing to fear any more. Those White army soldiers — may they be struck by five thunderbolts! — can't come here now."

"Everything's all right. You see — several hundred thousand of our troops have come from east of the river."

Several hundred thousand? Dayong thought. There are only about eight thousand of us altogether!

He had run across this sort of thing often in wartime. People frequently invented good news or believed reports however contradictory and ridiculous they might be, as long as they were optimistic.

"Is the enemy far from here, neighbours?" he called as he marched.

"Far? Some folks say they've already reached our Yanan City. The way I figure, they're probably about seven miles to the south."

"Huh! Blind talk! Comrade, the enemy are at least 10 or 12 miles from Yanan."

"Yanan . . . it looks bad, very bad."

This divergence of reports among the peasants showed how confused the situation was. Dayong felt depressed.

"Neighbours," he said, "we heard you left the danger zone long ago. How is it you've only come this far?"

A dozen voices tried to answer at once:

"No one likes to leave his home and bit of land, however humble they may be."

"A poor man treasures his shack more than the rich love their gold and silver mansions."

"It's hard to say now. The comrade who's the head of our township government kept urging us to move every day, to settle in some place far away where it's safe. But we thought — our army will never let the Whites take Yanan. Anyhow they'll finish them off in a couple of days, then we can come back. But today everything's so mixed up. It's hard to say."

"When will the fighting end? How are we going to live?"

Dayong's face was dark. He tried, as he walked along with them, to make the peasants understand why it was necessary for a long campaign.

The road was so jammed with refugees, the column was unable to move forward. At the order of the brigade commander, the troops in the lead swung off the road to the right to march along the river. The rest of the column prepared to follow.

Dayong halted beside a big cart on which a boy of eleven or twelve, who had been wounded by enemy strafing, lay groaning. Beside the boy lay a woman who had stopped breathing. Peasants said she had been killed by enemy planes which strafed them a few miles back.

Dayong stood rigid, his right hand clutching his leather belt, his left hand tightly grasping the wooden holster of his Mauser. His face was stony, expressionless. The blood seemed frozen in his veins; his heart felt like it was being twisted by a pair of pliers. Several paces away, Wang Chengde, First Company's political instructor, noisily expelled an angry breath.

Dayong's eyes shifted from the cart to the faces of the PLA men. All the men were looking straight ahead, as if they couldn't bear the tragic scene on the cart.

An old lady stood beside the cart. The dead woman and the wounded boy were her relatives. She stared at them dazedly. Everything was blurred to her, like in a dream. Her gaze drifted to the stern-faced soldiers. Again she looked at her dead daughter-in-law and injured grandson. The merciless flames had already crept to Yanan; they were already burning about her head! War had already destroyed the home she had struggled so hard to build, with sweat and blood, drop by drop.

Tears rolled from the old lady's eyes.

"Son," she said bitterly to Dayong, "you must tear the dirty hearts out of those murdering White bandits!"

"Don't you worry, old mama," said a PLA man, "we're not going to let them take Yanan no matter what happens."

Dozens of children trooped among the soldiers, taking the men's hands, asking all sorts of questions. One child about seven, standing on a mound, wrapped his arms around Dayong's neck and said:

"Uncle, I've brought my school bag along. Our teacher said we could have races in a couple of days, uncle."

Dayong turned around and took the little boy's face in his hands. He gazed into the child's eyes for a long, long time.

Suddenly, from the head of the column the bugle blared an air-raid warning. All the buglers down the line passed on the call. An agitating call that sent shivers through a man's heart. Three enemy fighter planes, without even pausing to circle, flew low along the valley and strafed the packed refugees. A woman threw up her hand and dropped in a pool of blood. The child she had been suckling at her breast was flung far to the side of the road. Disregarding the rain of bullets, Dayong rushed to the baby and clutched him close to his chest, using his broad back as a shield. Actually the child was already dead.

Dayong — who had endured much in life, who had marched thousands of miles through the fires of battle — had tears in his eyes. His every nerve was painfully taut, his every corpuscle ready to burst!

When the planes had gone, peasants from villages along the road came hurrying to offer help, bringing door planks to serve as stretchers. As they dressed the wounded and buried the dead, their eyes were dry. They neither wept nor wailed. They did not speak, or even sigh. A solemn hush hung over the valley. Dust and the smell of powder filled the air.

From the head of the valley, a dozen district and township officials came running, all with rifles slung across their backs. They had been working day and night without rest, and their eyes were bloodshot. They spoke to the milling peasants, telling them where to find safety.

The refugees — thousands of old folks, women, children — moved off toward the big gorge in the mountains to the east. Miserable with the pain of having lost dear ones, they walked on, their heavy steps raising a cloud of dust that obscured the heavens.

Dayong's face was black with fury. He couldn't erase from his mind the old lady's tragic expression and the lively eyes of the little schoolboy. Chengde, the company political instructor, suddenly appeared beside him, shouting in a cracked voice:

"Comrades, remember them! They were killed by American running dogs, with American planes and American bullets!"

But Dayong didn't hear a word. Like the other PLA men, his blood was boiling. He had only one thought, one desire — to move on immediately, get hold of those savages invading the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region, and shove his bayonet through them! The column flew forward. . . . And as he marched, Dayong fixed his hawk-like eyes on the sky above Yanan. Only a few lazy clouds floated above the city, clouds tinged red as fire by the rising sun.

Noon of the 19th of March, 1947, found the column at Ganguyi, a small town 27 miles due east of Yanan. From here a road led directly to the city. The crystal-clear waters of the Yanshui River which skirted the town flowed from Yanan; they had lapped the foot of the mountain containing the cave offices of the Party's Central Committee and Chairman Mao.

Ganguyi, how familiar the men were with this place.

During the war against Japan, thousands of government and Party workers had passed through here on their way to study in Yanan. Most who had left Yanan for the anti-Japanese fighting fronts across the Yellow River had also gone by way of Ganguyi. The little town had been a bustling place then, but now all the shop doors were shut tight. The only life on the desolate streets was patrols of local militia, carrying rifles, spears or swords.

Like a hurrying tide, the column swept down the main street, bringing a breath of life to the small town.

The sound of explosives could be heard in the distance. The PLA men argued — some said it was artillery fire; others insisted it was bombing.

Crossing a street intersection with his headquarters unit, Wei Yi, regimental chief of staff, noticed brigade commander Chen standing on the steps of a house by the side of the road. Chen was looking towards the west. Wei Yi dismounted and walked up to him.

"I know every tree and blade of grass around Yanan," said the brigadier, turning towards Wei Yi. "Let me see. It must have been 1942 when I came through here last . . . that's right, 1942. I had been recalled from the front and was on my way to Yanan for a study course."

"I was sent to Yanan myself in 1941. I studied there till 1944. Then I was sent to work at the front. I passed through here both times."

"You were a long time in Yanan. You must know the place well."

"I certainly do. Remember that Central Party School outside the northern city gate, commander? I heard the talks there in 1942 by Chairman Mao on the movement to reform backward thinking."

"I remember very well. That was the school I was studying in." Chen gazed to the west again. All he could see was the mountain range stretching into the distance and the clouds above Yanan. "Ah, Wei Yi, who knows how much north Shaanxi and Yanan have meant to the Chinese revolution," he said. "During the ten years of the civil war we never could get any rest; only when we reached north Shaanxi were we able to relax. When the Anti-Japanese War started, north Shaanxi became our major rear area. Our officers and officials from all over the country — especially the ones holding responsible posts — nearly every one of them went to study in Yanan. Nearly every one of them has eaten millet with the peasants of north Shaanxi."

The two men talked with the enthusiasm of men discussing their native village, as if everything there — be it only a stone — was vitally connected with their existence.

"If we only weren't at war now," said Wei Yi, "but were going back to Yanan to report on our work, to study, to see our old comrades. . . . But what's the use of dreaming? Today war is everything."

Brigadier Chen clasped his hands behind his back and stood watching the quickly marching soldiers of the PLA. He spoke not another word.

3

YANAN is ringed by mountains; the waters of the Yanshui River flow past the city's walls. East of the city, on Baota Hill, rises the imposing Precious Pagoda. To the northeast, on Qingliang Mountain, are the Caves of the Ten Thousand Buddhas and old stone inscriptions. Set against such a background, Yanan stands out as a place of exceptional grandeur and beauty.

Close both to the Great Wall and the Yellow River, this ancient city is as illustrious in China's revolutionary history as Jinggangshan and the town of Ruijin. Many a glorious deed in those stormy early years is inseparably linked with the name of Yanan. In October of 1935, the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army, led by the Central Committee of the Communist Party and Chairman Mao, arrived in north Shaanxi after the Long March that had covered more than 8,000 miles.

Yanan became the heart of China, the headquarters of the Chinese revolution, the fountain-head of victory.

Then Japanese artillery boomed in the attack at Lugouqiao (Marco Polo Bridge) near Beijing, and the nation was plunged into blood and fire. Thousands of people flowed to Yanan like a tide, seeking the principles that would save the country.

And in Yanan the Central Committee and Chairman Mao nurtured and educated them, armed them with the ideological weapons for victory. Thanks to the strength of these weapons, the Chinese people were finally able to defeat the Japanese invaders after eight years of war.

But no sooner were the Japanese driven out than the American imperialists rushed in with full support for Chiang Kai-shek in kindling the huge flames of a civil war.

The Central Committee and Chairman Mao in Yanan led the Chinese people in a fierce battle against the foe. The people, suffering under the Kuomintang rule of Chiang Kai-shek, heard the determined call of the Central Committee and Chairman Mao rung out from Yanan, a call which split the dark southern heavens and let in light to illuminate the path of struggle.

With the Central Committee and Chairman Mao in Yanan, the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region became a joyful place. People had enough to eat and enough to wear. Every year after the autumn harvest, peasant representatives, bearing melons and fruit and vegetables, came to Yanan to report the size of their bumper crops to Chairman Mao. Chairman Mao often strolled with his worker and peasant visitors through the lovely hills while chatting with them of factory production methods or how to get a good yield on a farm.

Every day, at dawn and at dusk, flocks of sheep and herds of cattle, on their way to and from the grazing grounds, crossed the mountain-top opposite the cave in which Chairman Mao had his home. Herdsmen, their eyes on the windows of his cave home, sang ballads in his praise.

The best weather in north Shaanxi came at the end of summer and beginning of autumn. In the early morning a heavy mist covered Yanan and all of the surrounding hills and streams. It was difficult to see more than a few dozen paces. The bells around the necks of the pack animals would be heard with peculiar clarity, heralding the beginning of another workday. From the far, mist-enveloped peaks came the strains of a folk song. Then the gorgeous red rays of the rising sun struck the tip of Baota Hill, and the mist parted like a curtain. Yanan emerged into the sunlight. On the slopes and in the ravines, groups of people conducted classes and discussion groups.

Fat sheep and goats gambolled on the mountain-sides. A child, tending them, lolled on a hillock covered with wild flowers and played a tune on a flute. The wind swayed the millet and sorghum covering the slopes. Old men sat beneath the fruit trees in the valleys, humming to themselves as they twisted strings of yarn. A girl, leading an ox or some woolly sheep to the river for a drink, drifted into a reverie staring at the rippled reflection of the Precious Pagoda.

Yanan at sunset was a symphony of song. Near the city a chorus of young voices rose: *Some of China's best youth have gathered on the shores of the Yellow River....* People meandered at the foot of the mountain where the Central Committee and Chairman Mao lived.

When swarms of fireflies glowed in the dusk along the banks of the Yanshui, Yanan sank into deep, profound thought.

At night, orange lamplight shone in the windows of the row upon row of cave-dwellings that lined the sides of the mountains surrounding the city. From Yanan the mountains gave the impression of huge skyscraper buildings. On the other side of those myriad of windows, thousands of people concentrated on their work, their reading, their discussion.

Stars like crystals in the heavens; on earth, the gurgle of flowing water. Democratic, sacred Yanan — how beautiful in the night!

But today — the 18th of March, 1947 — the vast city of Yanan sprawled in frigid darkness. In the northern and southern ends of the city, houses bombed by enemy planes had burned for several days. Their wooden frames were charred and blackened, emitting only an occasional spark that flew into the night sky. Except for the security patrols which would be the last to leave, the streets were deserted. Administrative personnel, students, local residents — every single one had departed. There was no singing, no laughter, no thousands of lamps gleaming in the mountain cave-dwellings. Only the waters of the Yanshui, flowing endlessly to the east, were still the same.

Very late on the night of the 18th a large detachment of the North-west Field Army men entered the south gate of the city. They were withdrawing from the southern front. Their flashlights pierced the darkness, revealing the big whitewash letters on the city wall:

> *Democratic, sacred Yanan belongs to us.*
> *We shall return!*

The men marched in silence, their steps heavy and slow, as if they were deliberately trying to prolong their stay in Yanan. At times an angry explosive breath could be heard. One soldier, his head swathed in bloody bandages, still smelling of gunpowder, caressed the sides of buildings as he walked. A wounded man begged his stretcher bearers to set him down and remove the quilt covering his face so that he could see Yanan. From the sound of his voice, he had just recovered consciousness.

Emerging through the north gate of the city, the detachment split into two columns. One followed the ravine leading west; the other took the ravine leading east.

Stern-looking sentries ringed the hamlet of Wangjiaping, beyond Yanan's north gate. In the ravine leading to the hamlet, near a grove of peach trees, many military and administrative personnel were waiting for the order to depart. Some stood by their horses, and the pack animals laden with documents. A few paced among the trees. Some sat around small stone tables in the grove, talking in low tones.

A lamp was burning in the window of a cave-dwelling half-way up the slope. The men waiting in the ravine kept looking towards that window.

Heavy explosions and machine-gun fire were audible in the distance.

Six horsemen, hurrying up from the south, ran through Yanan City and out of the north gate, turned right and splashed across a shallow ford in the Yanshui River. They dismounted, and two of them turned their horses over to their companions and strode up the slope to Wangjiaping.

The two cavalry messengers who had taken over the horses walked them along the river bank. One of the other two — apparently officers — lit a cigarette. As he and his companion paced back and forth beside the Yanshui, they cast frequent glances at the shining window on the slope.

"It will soon be dawn," said one of the officers. "At dawn the enemy will be able to take Yanan. But Deputy Commander-in-Chief Peng Dehuai still hasn't left." He turned to his companion. "Now that our brigade commander and political commissar have gone to see him, I suppose he won't stay much longer."

"How can he — at a time like this."

The officers fell silent, each seeming to concentrate on the red glowing tip of his cigarette. One heaved an exasperated sigh.

"We've given the enemy a bellyful these past few days, in spite of their heavy attacks in the south and south-west."

"Our men have plenty of courage. Hu Zongnan is throwing 150,000 men against us. We've got only about 5,000, but we've put more than that number of enemy out of action in the past week and killed He Qi, the general of their 48th Brigade. Most important of all, we've won time — time for the Central Committee and our various organizations and schools and the people of Yanan to leave safely. We've spiked the enemy's scheme to drive into Yanan and take our Central Committee by surprise."

"We fought very well, but we have to withdraw. Still, what can we do? That's the way war is sometimes. In another two or three hours Yanan will fall into the hands of the enemy. Losing Yanan hurts, no matter how you look at it."

Their eyes drifted to a hilltop ahead of them to the left, where lay the two small villages in which the Central Committee and Chairman Mao lived — Date Orchard Village and Yangjia Ridge.

"Our Central Committee and Chairman Mao must have gone north somewhere."

"This is our last look at Yangjia Ridge and Date Orchard Village —"

"Wait a minute. Aren't those lights over there?"

At the foot of the mountain to their left a lantern appeared, then a second, and a third.

The dark mountains on either side of the river loomed against a pitch black sky. Muffled explosions rolled in from the distance. There was a smell of powder in the air. Silent Yanan seemed to be brooding on the disaster that was imminent. How strange seeing lights in this sombre setting — and such bright lights. They were like the mast lights of a ship on a vast and stormy sea, a ship riding out a night of gale and rain, never leaving her charted course, sailing straight on towards her destination.

The lights passed within twenty yards of where the officers were standing. They could clearly see a long military column. At the head of it were several people carrying large lanterns. Behind came animals laden with radio equipment, documents and baggage. Bringing up the rear were what appeared to be combat troops.

As the column marched by — very slowly, in neat formation — quiet footfalls blended with the sound of the flowing waters of the Yanshui; there was the light clink of metal weapon fittings, the clatter of shod hoofs.

They watched the lantern lights and the column file by the foot of Qingliang Mountain, then turn and slowly proceed towards the valley leading east from Yanan.

The two officers who had been reporting to General Peng Dehuai came down the slope to the bank of the river. The other two officers hurried towards them.

"Brigadier, you saw General Peng? What did he say?"

"He said if we hold Yanan it will be a burden on our back; if we give it up it will be a weight on the enemy. He said we shouldn't fly off the handle. The enemy will never get the best of us. They're heading for a fall. That's how it was in the past, that's how it is now, and that's how it's going to be in the future."

"Was he very angry, brigadier?"

The political commissar standing behind the brigade commander answered for him. "Not that we could notice. In fact he advised us to be calm and methodical. We should take the enemy's positions one by one, and bit by bit build up our own strength. He said it was wrong to throw yourself blindly against objectives without regard to your striking power."

The brigadier sat down on a rock and looked at the dark city of Yanan. "General Peng has ordered our main force to assemble in the neighbourhood of Qinghua Gorge, 20 miles north-east of Yanan, and wait for orders. He's also sending a small detachment north-west, in the direction of Ansai, to retreat slowly and draw the enemy after it, until our main force is ready to attack. General Peng apparently has everything nicely arranged for Hu Zongnan. He said the enemy will make a big grab at Yanan and catch nothing but the empty air. They won't gain anything politically, and they'll get even less militarily. But, General Peng said, once the enemy take Yanan they're sure to go crazy with conceit; they'll sneer at our army. Except for a small garrison to hold the city and protect their lines of communication, they're sure to send their main force out to finish us off. Our detachment luring them towards the north-west will play on this psychology of theirs. A wild dash against another mirage in Ansai County will take some of the starch out of them."

"Not only that," added the political commissar, "but they'll be forced to make mistakes which our army, at its leisure, will be able to take advantage of." He swung his left hand. "What happens after that, depends on us." The commissar looked at the lighted window half-way up the slope. "General Peng is going to leave here immediately."

The sound of artillery fire came closer, shaking the air with its vibrations. It would soon be dawn, and the night momentarily became deeper.

The messengers led the horses forward. With his hand on the saddle, the brigadier said:

"Let's go, comrades. The advance guard of the enemy's left wing is only seven miles south of Yanan."

All the men mounted.

Reining his horse, the brigadier looked around at Yanan. It was dark and he couldn't see anything clearly, but he had to take one more look. Who knew how long it would be before they returned again?

"Did a column just pass here a few moments ago?" he asked in a hoarse voice. "It did? That was our Chairman Mao and the Central Committee organizations."

"What do you mean, brigadier?" the two officers demanded excitedly. "They're leaving Yanan only now? Impossible. Why is Chairman Mao leaving so late?"

"Don't ask me, comrades," replied the brigade commander, anger and bitterness welling up in his throat. "I don't know. Let's go."

He dug his heels into his horse's sides and the animal broke into a gallop. The other five horses raced after him. The riders followed the path just taken by Chairman Mao and the Central Committee — towards the east. In the dark night, the drumming hoof beats intensified the warlike atmosphere hanging over Yanan.

Two hours after the horsemen had departed, enemy artillery shells raised black columns of smoke from the city's streets. Yanan was in flames. The glow of the disastrous fires reddened half the sky.

4

THE army which was speeding from Shanxi assembled in a gorge west of Ganguyi and awaited further orders. Shortly before dark on the evening of March 19, 1947, Wang Shaoxin,

a mounted messenger from regiment, came galloping up the gorge. As he was passing the encampment of First Battalion, a few of the soldiers who knew him hailed:

"Where to, Shaoxin?"

The young messenger checked his horse. "Brigade political department to pick up the news bulletin."

"Anything happening?"

"I hear the enemy have taken . . . Yanan . . . and, and — anyhow I'm not sure."

The faces of the soldiers drained of colour. All crowded around Shaoxin.

"What's the real story about Yanan, you blasted imp!"

"You can't get blood from a stone," retorted the boy, worried and a little angry. "I'm not the commander-in-chief. How would I know so much?"

He jerked his reins and slammed his heels into his horse's flanks. The animal flew down the gorge like mad, the drumming of its hoofs on the icy ground pounding fiercely against the soldiers' hearts. A pall of misery descended on the lonely gorge.

"Yanan abandoned?" The shocking news spread like the wind from one unit to the next. The men discussed it anxiously. Some said it was just a rumor; our Party's Central Committee and Chairman Mao were both in Yanan; would we let the enemy take it so easily? Others said we've come to defend Yanan; how could it be given up without even giving us a chance to get into action? Impossible. Not in a million years!

It didn't take long before the original news had changed completely. A few soldiers said yes, the enemy had reached Yanan's walls, but that they still hadn't entered the city. Some claimed that an enemy detachment had broken in but that we had thrown them out again. Others alleged that the abandonment of Yanan was a story invented by an enemy spy; that the spy had been caught and was under heavy guard.

But no matter how the man changed and embroidered the news to suit their own fancy, no matter how staunchly they asserted that they didn't believe a word of it, foreboding hung in the breast of every man like a stone. In First Company, half the food at dinner was left over.

That night a big wind rose. It blew out the stars and spread a black curtain of clouds across the sky. The distant artillery fire often could be heard quite clearly; other times it was dim and muffled.

A meeting of First Company was called. The men assembled on a small field beside the river and seated themselves tensely in a neat formation. Company meetings usually were preceded by a lot of friendly chatter, joking, swearing. Men were called upon to recite topical ballads they had composed. This platoon or that was asked for a song. The men came from all over China, and a great variety of folk art could be heard in these pre-meeting intervals — happy, boisterous sessions as a rule. Today, the men sat tense, solemn, gloomy. To break up the depressing atmosphere, the cultural instructor stepped out and led the company in a song. The men's voices were loud and angry:

As sure as China's mountains raise their heads high,
As sure as China's rivers flow rushing by,
So surely our country independent must be,
The people of China demand to be free.
Gladly we follow Mao into the fight,
We smashed the Japanese with our might,
Today we'll pound into a bloody wreck
America's running dog, Chiang Kai-shek.

Fight on, fight on, wherever you may be,
From victory to victory to victory!

Over and over, the song rang out. Not until the officer of the day declared the meeting opened did the men still their voices.

Zhang Pei, political instructor of the First Battalion, stood listening off to one side. Near him, Zhou Dayong slouched with his back against a tree. Dayong's head was lowered. One hand gripped his belt; the other was pressed against his forehead.

"Our company political instructor has gone to a meeting at regiment's political department," Dayong said to Zhang Pei. "He won't be back for some time. We'd better not wait for him. Go ahead and speak."

"No, you speak first. I may not want to say anything."

Dayong was a direct, cheerful young fellow. To tell the truth, he seldom knew what it was to brood. He usually addressed the meetings in a clear strong voice. But now when he opened his mouth he only got as far as "Comrades . . ." and then something seemed to stick in his throat. He couldn't see the soldiers, he couldn't hear the wind; he hadn't the faintest idea what he wanted to say. After a long pause, Zhang Pei nudged him. Only then did Dayong remember what he had to announce. He forced out the words:

"Our army has withdrawn from Yanan."

As if in response to an order, every man in the company leaped to his feet.

For a full five or six minutes no one spoke. The only sound was the light quick breathing of the assembled men. You had the feeling that a single word, even a cough, would spark a tremendous explosion.

Gust after gust of wind, laden with sand, rolled in over the mountains and moaned through the ravines and gorges. Veils of blowing sand darkened the sky.

The silence was unbearable. Suddenly a soldier burst out: "You mean Yanan where our Central Committee and Chairman Mao . . . really. . . . Speak, commander!"

Except for the men's harsh breathing, the field was deathly still. Hearts thumped like drum beats, eyes dimmed, heads whirled. The ground underfoot seemed to melt away like spring snows.

Dayong stood woodenly, his mind in a turmoil. A sledgehammer seemed to be pounding against his burning heart. Hot tears began to roll down his cheeks.

A soldier wept quietly. In an instant the whole company was in tears. Men sobbed and stamped their feet. Tears dropped on hands, on chests, on the icy rifle butts.

Zhang Pei could see that Dayong was unable to go on. The political instructor stepped up before the men. He wanted to speak, but he couldn't get the words out. Though he knew very well the purpose and significance of our departure from Yanan, at the moment he was in the same state as the men — his eyes filled with tears.

"Comrades," he cried in a voice that trembled, "sit down. Comrades, it's true that we've left Yanan. Today is the nineteenth of March. We'll never forget this day."

"Report!" Soldier Ma Changsheng had stepped forward. "Yanan belongs to us. Yanan . . . the Central Committee . . . Chairman Mao. . . ." He beat his chest with his fist as if there was something inside ready to burst.

Repressing his own turbulent emotions, Zhang Pei checked his tears. "Comrades," he said, "the Central Committee left Yanan with complete safety. You don't have to worry. Our brigade commander tells us that Chairman Mao will remain in north Shaanxi directing the nationwide war of liberation. What's more, he will lead the forces here personally. Chairman Mao is here with us, comrades —"

Ma Quanyou, leader of Squad Two, jumped to his feet. "Report! Political instructor," he shouted, "I have something to say. We . . . we Communists, we revolutionary soldiers, marched day and night from Shanxi hurrying . . . hurrying to defend the Central Committee, to defend Chairman Mao, to defend . . . to defend Yanan, and now. . . . What kind of Communists, what kind of revolutionary soldiers are we anyway!"

"Instructor!" cried a soldier. "For our Chairman Mao — give us the order! Fight! We want to fight!"

Like a clap of thunder the men roared in unison:

"Fight! Fight!"

"We'll fight to the finish!"

The weeping changed to shouts, the shouts became battle vows, vows that swept higher than the rising gale.

"Don't feel badly, comrades, don't cry," shouted Zhang Pei. "Listen to me, comrades! It's not our strategy to cling to any one city or piece of ground. Once we wipe out the enemy's armed forces, we'll be able to take Yanan back — and we'll liberate Xian, too. Chiang Kai-shek and his bandits have taken Yanan, but it's no victory for them. It only means they're going to their death all the faster. Comrades, don't take it to heart, don't cry. Sharpen your bayonets instead, comrades, sharpen your bayonets —"

Ma Quanyou thrust his rifle against the sky. "Instructor, we swear . . . we swear — we'll fight to the last man to retake Yanan!"

Throughout the meeting Tiger Wang, leader of Squad One, had sat with his back against a mound, silently cradling his rifle in his arms. Nor did he move when the meeting was over, not until Ma Quanyou tugged him by the arm and said, "Come on, Tiger. Let's go."

Then he rose slowly, as silent as before. Quanyou wanted to question him, but he knew it would be useless. In the entire company, Tiger Wang was the man most able to keep hatred buried deep in his heart.

5

THE following evening Wei Yi, regimental chief of staff, and Zhang Pei, the First Battalion's political instructor, made a tour of the companies. Leaving the row of caves in which Second Company was quartered and descending the slope, they entered a ravine and followed along the small stream flowing through it.

Someone hurried up behind them and cried, "Report!"

Zhang Pei looked around. Although he couldn't see the man's features in the dark, from his chunky outline Zhang Pei recognized him as the veteran cook of First Company — Sun Quanhou.

"What's on your mind, old Sun?" asked Zhang Pei.

"Instructor," began Sun. He swallowed hard. "Instructor, am I only fit to wield a vegetable knife? I . . . I can do combat duty. The instructor and the comrades all say I'm too old. Fifty-seven, well . . . instructor . . . I . . . anyhow I'm a Communist Party member . . . even if I were eighty. . . . Now everyone has vowed to defend the Central Committee and Chairman Mao. I want to be transferred to a combat squad. If only I can kill a few of the enemy with my own hands, I'll die happy!"

For the moment Zhang Pei didn't know what to say. Clasping his hands behind his back, he lightly scuffed the ground with his right foot.

Wei Yi walked up to the cook. "You've a loyal heart, old Sun," he said. "The Party is well aware of that. But cooking is an indispensable job too."

Unhappy, Sun lowered his head. "There's a feeling inside me. . . ."

Zhang Pei took his hand. "Your attitude is fine, old Sun. We all want to do something worthwhile in life and stand in the forefront of the struggle. But not everyone can carry a machine-gun, some must hold a cooking ladle. Do you see what I mean?"

"Yes, I suppose so. Instructor . . . I. . . ." Sun hesitated, then slowly turned and walked away.

Wei Yi and Zhang Pei proceeded side by side along the path through the mountain ravine. Neither of them spoke. Both had been quite moved by Sun's request, and they couldn't get him out of their minds.

They approached a cave from which the sound of lively conversation was issuing. Lamplight was shining in the cave's open doorway. Dayong, deep in thought, stood outside beside the wall.

"Holding a meeting?" asked Zhang Pei.

"Party branch."

Zhang Pei put his head in the door. Wang Chengde, the company political instructor, was speaking.

Zhang Pei turned to Dayong. "Why aren't you in there?"

Dayong didn't answer. He knew now it was true that our army had left Yanan several days before, but he still couldn't bring himself to believe it. Sometimes his mind was fuzzy, as if he had just awakened from a bad dream.

"This war is going to be a long drawn-out affair, comrade," said Zhang Pei. "We'll have to put up with a great many trials and tribulations."

There was a slight tremor in Dayong's voice as he replied: "I understand the reasoning all right, instructor. But I just can't get it all down in one swallow. If the enemy had beaten us we'd have to admit defeat. But nothing like that happened."

"Let me ask you, Dayong," said Wei Yi, "what do you think we ought to do? Throw ourselves at the enemy blindly? Here in the north-west the enemy has mobilized several hundred thousand troops. We've got a total of only a little over twenty thousand. The enemy has American arms and equipment. And we? Let's take rifles. Japanese '.38's' and guns that Shanxi warlord Yan Xishan made in his Taiyuan arsenal — with only a few bullets for each. In other words, we have to rely on rifles, bayonets, explosives and hand grenades to beat an enemy equipped with the most modern weapons. And we have to get everything we use by pulling it out of the enemy's hands. If you take my advice, you'll do your work patiently and keep making this point clear to the men: Our job is to wipe out enemy troops. Once we do that, everything else will come easy. You men shouldn't waste a minute, Dayong. We're going into action very soon!"

Dayong's spirits immediately rose. "On the level?" he asked quickly.

"On the level. Tomorrow afternoon, we move."

6

THE main force of the North-west Field Army was concealed behind mountains forming the east and west sides of the deep Qinghua Gorge.

All day officers surveyed the terrain from the tops of the mountains along the gorge; near the summits some men were digging fortifications.

Zhao Jin, commander of the regiment, led a group of about thirty officers on a tour of the mountain-tops. From time to time he peered through his field glasses, then he and the officers, gathering around a military map which they spread on the ground, discussed deployment of forces, methods of attack.

All nodded in agreement at something Wei Yi said. "Yes, it is a perfect spot for an ambush."

"It certainly is," said Liu Yuanxing, commander of the First Battalion. "You couldn't find an inch of cover in the whole Qinghua Gorge even if you looked for it with a lantern. If only we can get the enemy in here, we can finish off every one of them. It's a beautiful ambush."

Qinghua Gorge is about twenty miles north-east of Yanan. The Xianyang-Yulin Highway runs east from Yanan about fifteen miles to a village called Guaimao and there turns north to enter the Qinghua Gorge. Flanked by high mountains on the east and west, the gorge is traversed lengthwise by a small river; the highway parallels the river.

After inspecting several more mountain-tops, the regimental C.O. and his party again laid out the military map and leaned over it thoughtfully, the officers gathered in a circle around Zhao Jin.

With a twig, Zhao Jin pointed at positions on the map. "Comrades," he said, "our entire army is camped on these surrounding mountains. When the enemy enters the ambush region, Qinghua Gorge, our troops at the northern end will open fire. Other units will then attack from the heights on both sides. The mission of our regiment will be to cut off the enemy's retreat and guarantee our main force the opportunity to wipe out the enemy's whole Thirty-first Brigade." His eyes swept the faces of the officers around him. "That is how our units will be disposed."

The officers looked at the nearby summits as they thought over his words. A few made some written notes.

"It's a sack, all right," said one in a low tone. "Once the enemy get in here, we'll take care of them nicely."

"But what if they don't come in?"

"None of us are fortune-tellers," said Liu, the First Battalion C.O., "but it's very possible the enemy will come this way."

"Not just possible — absolutely positive," interjected Zhao Jin.

He told them that after Hu Zongnan's troops had occupied Yanan, the enemy became very arrogant, charging wildly about the countryside, boasting that they were going to "exterminate" our main force. A small detachment had fooled them into believing that it was our main force and led them a merry chase all the way to Ansai Valley, north-west of Yanan. Yesterday over fifty thousand enemy troops charged into Ansai County to "exterminate" us. At the same time, the enemy Thirty-first Brigade, sent out as a right wing, was moving up towards Qinghua Gorge. It had already reached the village of Guaimao, where the road from Yanan turns north, and was now only nine or ten miles from our ambush position.

"So you see, comrades," the regimental commander concluded, "we've got the enemy taking orders from our General Peng Dehuai. Our main job now is to put General Peng's plan into effect."

Zhao Jin's appearance showed his years of military service. His belt and puttees always fitted neatly; he held himself ramrod straight. Because he had been wounded about ten

times and had lost a lot of blood his face was thin and sallow.

"Look there," he cried suddenly, pointing to an officer on the eastern slope. "701 is coming."

Brigade commander Chen, accompanied by five or six officers, was seen climbing towards Zhao Jin's inspection party.

Chen's forehead was beaded with sweat. He had already visited several mountain positions. With the alert movements of a soldier, he took up his field glasses and examined the surrounding terrain. On the mountains west of Qinghua Gorge Chen could see small groups of officers of other units also making surveys. After a few minutes, Chen let the glasses hang by the strap around his neck and rest on his chest. "Don't forget about concealment," he said sharply to the messengers standing near him. "What are you all crowding together for!"

Placing his hands behind his back, the brigadier faced Zhao Jin's inspection party. "Our first volley must go off with a bang that will take the starch out of the enemy." Handing his field glasses to his escort orderly, Chen patted the dust from his uniform. "Have you got a pretty good idea of the layout now?" he asked Zhao Jin.

The regimental C.O. stood stiffly at the brigadier's side. After a moment's thought he replied, "We've made a preliminary survey. We've also started some of our units on digging in."

Chen questioned him about the regiment's gun emplacements and deployment of troops, then turned to one of Zhao Jin's junior officers. "You're clear on your regiment's mission in this engagement, are you? Good. Let me hear it."

"After the enemy has entered the area of ambush and firing begins at the far end," said the officer, "we are to cut off the enemy's retreat route at all costs and tie the mouth of the 'sack' shut tight." Pointing left to the entrance of the gorge, he added, "There's the mouth we have to seal."

For five minutes or so Chen looked towards the gorge entrance in silence. Then he asked another officer, "Where is your best line of attack?"

"Jump that ridge directly in front of us and cut straight down."

Chen considered this. "Have you examined the other side of the ridge personally?"

"What for? It's a simple stretch of ground. Anyone can see it at a glance."

"As simple as all that, eh? Well, I'm going to have a look." Chen glanced at Zhao Jin. "Some of the things that appear to be the most simple, in battle often turn out to be the most complicated."

Zhao Jin stared straight ahead without batting an eye. He had a feeling that Chen's last remark was directed against him. He accompanied Chen as the brigadier toured the regiment's mortar and heavy machine-gun positions on another ridge. There, Chen personally checked the machine-gun sights.

"You haven't inspected here yet, Zhao Jin?"

"Not yet."

Chen turned to the officers commanding the position. "What is the mission of these weapons?"

"Report," said one of the officers. "Our mission is to seal the mouth of the gorge."

"I can't even *see* the mouth of the gorge through the sights of this machine-gun in its present position. How many heavy machine-guns does this regiment have? How many rounds of ammunition?"

"Four heavy machine-guns, with an average of 350 rounds each."

"Nonsense. One of those guns — the Maxim — can't be used. Right?"

"Right."

"A few hundred rounds won't last long, once the battle starts," Chen said to a machine-gunner. "What will you do when your ammo is gone?"

The soldier, standing at attention, made no reply.

"When the bullets are used up, Chiang Kai-shek will send us some more — is that what you're thinking? But you won't get him to send you any more with your gun in that position." Chen looked at the officers in charge of the emplacement. They were very embarrassed. Again he pointed at the machine-gun. "You won't be joining the battle, you'll just be adding to the noise. Bullets move faster than men can run. But unless you use your fire power to break the enemy's legs, you'll never tie up the mouth of that 'sack.' Some comrades like to say, 'Three rounds of artillery, a burst from our machine-guns, a good grenade charge, and the battle is won.' Well, just try it and see what happens. You'll get your head broken if you continue to wage warfare on that level. There's nothing polite about a battle, comrades."

After a pause, his eyes fixed on Zhao Jin, the brigadier continued, "This idea that everything is 'simple' kills a lot of people. I consider it very dangerous, and so should you." Without waiting for the regimental C.O. to reply, Chen turned and strode away.

Wei Yi, the regiment's chief of staff, took charge of correcting the machine-gun's position himself.

Chen continued his tour, hailing the soldiers as he went, shaking hands with those nearest him, exhorting, "Comrades, let's make that first volley good and loud." His cheerful tones rang through the trenches.

"We guarantee one that'll blast 'em, 701," the men shouted in response.

The brigadier questioned them about conditions in the companies — their battle preparations, the state of morale, whether they were cold sleeping at night, how the food was, whether they had tobacco. . . .

Approaching a trench, Chen found Dayong discussing something with platoon leader Li Jiangguo. "How are the men's spirits, Jiangguo?" the brigadier asked.

Jiangguo snapped to attention and looked Chen straight in the eye. "High as a kite and still climbing."

Chen burst into laughter. Then, examining Jiangguo from head to foot, he said, "You're a perky young fellow, but don't think you can get by just on verve." He pointed at the soldier's head. "You've got to put that thinking machine into motion."

He turned his smiling eyes to Dayong. "Young Old Revolutionary, this Jiangguo is a dashing, clever fighter, right?"

"Right."

Jiangguo concealed his delight behind an expression of the utmost sternness.

Suddenly the brigadier's face became grim. "Comrade Zhou Dayong, instruct every leader in your company that this battle must be fought well. No mistakes will be permitted."

After Chen had left, Jiangguo jumped down into the trench to stand beside Dayong. "That nickname the brigadier has given you —'Young Old Revolutionary' — it's really gotten around, commander. Everybody knows it now."

"When he calls me 'Young Old Revolutionary,' that's not so bad," said Dayong. "But when he calls me 'Comrade Zhou Dayong,' I know I'm in for it. Nine times out of ten it means he's going to tick me off. I've learned that all right."

7

ALL that night the men feverishly dug fortifications and built firing positions on the heights around Qinghua Gorge. Companies which finished first immediately began practice manoeuvres, making changes in their sector's fortifications wherever the manoeuvres proved them necessary. The mountain-tops echoed with the sound of picks and shovels, rapid footsteps, brief orders. It was forbidden to speak loudly or smoke. But there was always someone on the far side of the mountain, his head buried inside his opened jacket, taking a few quiet puffs. Every veteran knew you could go a day or two without food and not feel so bad. But if you couldn't have a smoke once in a while, your throat itched like the devil.

The men worked through the night. When the sky was a murky grey, they had camouflaged their positions and artillery emplacements. During daytime, except for a small force which remained to keep watch for the enemy, most of the troops withdrew behind the mountains forming the eastern and western sides of the gorge.

They took their positions again at dawn next day. It was said that the enemy's vanguard was approaching the ambush area. The PLA soldiers loaded their guns, opened the safeties on their hand grenades and lay the grenades in readiness on the lip of the trench. Their eyes on the entrance to the gorge, the men waited — one hour, two hours. . . . Late afternoon, and still no sign of the enemy. The heart of every man was in his throat with excitement; eyes ached from staring. To strike the first blow hard and accurately was vitally important.

Because no one was watching, the sun took advantage and plunged behind the western hills like a meteor in the night sky.

The experienced fighters — Jiangguo, Ma Quanyou, Ma Changsheng — fumed with exasperation. They knew the enemy never dared to move after sunset.

Tiger Wang, leader of Squad One, his pipe clamped in the corner of his mouth, squatted on his heels in the trench, silent, unperturbed. Through half-closed eyes he gazed at the bowl of his pipe, as if studying an object of rare beauty. His stolid appearance gave you the impression that he wouldn't be upset even if the sky fell.

One of the soldiers in his squad, Ning Jinshan, said to him uneasily, "We're not very far from Yanan and there are several thousand of us. Is it possible the enemy doesn't know we're here?"

His eyes still on his pipe, Tiger drawled, "What are you worrying about? The impatient man always eats half-cooked rice. Understand this — our ears are sharp and our eyes are bright, but the enemy — they're deaf and blind."

"I came over to the PLA from the KMT army less than a month ago," Jinshan ventured timidly, "but I'm not exactly an amateur about battles." He looked at Tiger Wang, calmly rapping the ashes out of his pipe. Jinshan didn't understand. What made Tiger and his mates so sure the enemy would walk into the ambush? He wasn't at all convinced. He thought the enemy fought very cleverly, too. Would they walk into the trap with their eyes wide open? Besides, their major actions were directed by the Americans and they were equipped with a lot of American heavy artillery — much stronger than the PLA guns. Jinshan gazed up at the enemy scouting planes sailing high overhead. It wasn't only this battle he was not very enthusiastic about.

He doubted whether the PLA would make much of a showing in future battles.

For some reason, Ma Quanyou suddenly became enraged. Glaring, the short scar on his face flaming scarlet, he yelled, "What are you chattering about? I'll pull your tongue out by the roots!"

Jinshan thought Quanyou's anger was directed against him, and his heart began chattering like a bucket-chain in a well.

But then a soldier beside Quanyou replied heatedly, "Oho, so you can't tell a man's honest heart from a donkey's liver and lungs? So that's how you take my good advice? All right, we'll settle this at the Party branch meeting!"

Jinshan breathed a sigh of relief. The argument had nothing to do with him.

The sun was nearly down. Red fleecy clouds reflected their crimson hues on the undulating hills. Thousands of ravens, cawing, flew home to their nests.

Still not even a shadow of the enemy!

At four a.m., the PLA soldiers headed for their positions in the dark. On slopes left and right of the gorge, troops were in motion. Except for their footsteps and the occasional clink of a bayonet against a hand grenade, all was silent.

By four thirty every man was at his post. Regimental C.O., Zhao Jin, made telephone contact with brigade headquarters, then sat down in the small cave serving as the regiment's command post and had a smoke.

Regimental chief of staff, Wei Yi, came striding along the ledge. He was always in high spirits, with apparently limitless energy and enthusiasm. Stooping, he entered the cave, knelt down and telephoned each of his battalions, instructing them to check their preparedness for battle.

Putting down the phone, he said to Zhao Jin, "Commander, brigade commissar Yang says he's going to First Battalion."

He paused to give some instructions to a staff officer and a communications platoon leader, then again turned to the regimental C.O. "I want to take a look at our ammo depot, commander," he said. "I'll be back in ten minutes."

After Wei Yi had gone, Zhao Jin also left the dugout and walked north along the ledge. Men were digging air-raid shelters, camouflaging the trenches with branches, talking in low tones. A few sat snoring, with their backs against the bluff. Suddenly, Zhao Jin spotted the beam of a flashlight.

"Is he trying to tell the enemy where we are?" he fumed softly. "The dumb fool!" He walked rapidly towards the beam.

From darkness till dawn, from dawn to sun-up, the men waited in the damp trenches.

"Today's the day," they said to themselves hopefully. Their faces, worn from lack of sleep, were anxious.

The commanders judged the passage of time by the shortening shadows of the trees. But the damn things didn't seem to change. The hands of their watches evidently were asleep too. Time always seems to take root just when you want it to move the fastest.

"Rat-tat-tat-tat . . . boom! boom!" Rifles and hand grenades suddenly sounded near the mouth of the gorge where it met the long river valley leading east from Yanan. The men were instantly alert, listening with every pore of their bodies. Startled, they looked at each other in silence. Every man was thinking — What rotten luck. Maybe the enemy's run into one of our scouting parties; maybe they've discovered the ambush. With the enemy at Qinghua Gorge, victory seemed so near, and yet so far.

The sun was a few yards above the eastern mountains. The river valley running east from Yanan was silent and

empty. Not a breath of wind stirred the trees. The very air seemed petrified. High in the sky a few enemy planes circled slowly. Scouting, most likely.

Not far from where the valley met the southern end of Qinghua Gorge was a small village. All of its inhabitants were gone.

An old man by the name of Li Zhende entered the valley from a branch gully. Carrying a long-stemmed pipe, he approached the village. He was about sixty, tall, with broad shoulders. His face was square in shape, his cheekbones high. Bushy brows almost covered his deep-set eyes. He wore a grey beard.

Every day for the past four or five days, the local peasants went to hide in the mountains before dawn, returning only after dark. But old Li didn't believe the enemy had occupied Yanan. When the others took to the mountains, he remained behind. Hadn't the enemy attacked the border region time after time, and hadn't we always thrown them back?

When, on March 19, 1947, some people said that the enemy really had taken Yanan, old Li had scoffed:

"Not that place, they haven't. Our Chairman Mao is there, been there for years."

Even after the village head explained the reason for our army's withdrawal, the old man continued to be stubborn. "When I was fighting the warlords in the Land Revolution, you were still a baby crawling around on a reed mat. You young fellows have got a lot to learn. Listening to all those wild stories the refugees are spreading!"

But in his heart the old man actually was not as confident as he appeared. Every day he sat on a bluff outside the village and watched the refugees streaming by. At night, he couldn't sleep a wink. Over and over, he asked himself —

Does the White army dare to come? Can they stand up against us? We gave them a real licking in the Land Revolution with only a few old rifles, and now we're ten times as strong.

He kept looking at the few personal possessions his family had so painfully acquired over the years — the jugs and crocks, the oven, the farm implements. He hated to think of abandoning them. He refused to let himself see anything but the brighter side of the picture.

Last night his eldest son, Li Yushan, had sent him a message, urging him to go with the rest of the family and hide out in the mountains during daylight. The old man was shaken. "If Yushan says to hide, I'd better hide," old Li muttered to himself. "That boy is clever. Never known him to be wrong."

He trusted the judgment of his eldest son completely. Yushan was the leader of an administrative district at the upper end of the valley. Last winter Yushan had been officially commended for his good work. Old Li had stroked his beard and said proudly:

"Yushan's the first to amount to anything in our family for a long time. Counting back three generations from me, we've all been ignorant mud-bellies. Couldn't even write our own names. Yushan, now, he can make that writing brush really wriggle. He was only a boy picking up empty shells for the Red Guards at the time of the Land Revolution. And today he's been commended as a model district leader!"

At dawn, old Li had prepared to go with his family to the mountains. Just as he was about to set out, a PLA scout came to the village and asked him whether he'd mind acting as a guide for a few hours. The scout said it was a very important mission and begged the old man not to refuse.

"Refuse," the old man snorted indignantly. "Who's the revolution being fought for if not for us? When did I ever put my personal affairs before a public duty?"

The scout laughed. "Fine, fine. You know what the revolution's all about, old timer, that's clear enough. Let's go."

As the old man was leaving, his wife told him that she was going to hide on the north mountain. But when he finished guiding the scouts and went to look for her there, she was nowhere to be seen. Probably the enemy hadn't come and everyone stayed in the village, he mused. There was no logic whatsoever in this deduction, but he was so drawn by the thought of his warm home and hearth that his feet led him automatically in that direction.

When he reached Yaodianze, a little village a mile or so from his own, his hair stood on end. Our troops had withdrawn and the enemy had not yet arrived. The village was one of those typical vacuums often found in a war area. Empty, no smoke rising from the chimneys, not even the sound of a chicken or a dog — devoid of all life. Continuing towards home, old Li had the uneasy feeling that at any moment some great catastrophe might come crashing down. Angrily, he scolded himself for his timidity — Living in peace so long has made you soft!

On the cliff walls, slogans were written in large white-wash letters:

> *Long live the Communist Party!*
>
> *We'll never be slaves of a foreign master! Men and women, young and old of the whole border region, arm yourselves! Wipe out the enemy!*
>
> *Conceal everything the enemy can eat or use! Hamper them, starve them to death!*

The village had been left absolutely bare. Not even a twig or stick of firewood remained.

Let the dirty bandits try carrying our cave-homes away! old Li thought with grim satisfaction.

As he neared the door of his home, enemy planes suddenly went screaming by, low overhead. The sound of explosions followed and flames and black smoke rose from the neighbouring village of Yaodianze. That was only fifteen miles from Yanan! Old Li anxiously looked at the sky over the city. It was grey and dull, but he imagined he could see the glare of fires there too.

"What are we coming to?" he said to himself. "Chairman Mao . . . Chairman Mao . . . nothing bad must happen to you!" Tears dimmed the old man's eyes.

He recalled the years he had suffered as a landlord's farm hand in the old society. In eleven years he had eaten only two catties of white flour. One tattered cotton-padded jacket had had to serve him for twenty-one years. In those days he used to say to his wife with a sigh, "All we've got is a mouth and a pair of hands each. When will we have a piece of land of our own so that they won't have to bury us by the river bank when we die?"

Then north Shaanxi went "Red," and old Li's family received a share of land and a plough ox and some sheep too. Working hard from morning till night, they gradually began to improve their living conditions. The border region grew better by the year. People no longer went hungry. If you dropped something on the road, no one would steal it.

"Is that all over now?" the old man asked himself. "Is the old society returning to torture us? Can the rivers be made to flow backwards?"

Just then, his little grandson, Shuanniu, came rushing towards him and broke his worried contemplations. The child had been running at top speed, and his round chubby face was red with exertion.

"Grandpa," he gasped. "I've been looking all over for you. Hurry to the mountains and hide."

Old Li shook his head. His eyes couldn't seem to focus and his legs felt weak. He was very tired.

The little boy pulled him by the hand. "Don't you hear me, Grandpa? There's shooting in the upper end of the valley. You've got to get over to the other side of the mountain. Our troops are there."

The old man's eyes lit up. "Haven't they gone east? You mean our army is really in the north mountains?"

"Really. Thousands of them!"

"Then we're saved!" old Li said, "Shuanniu, your mother is a very stubborn woman. I nearly wore my tongue out telling her — Don't let Shuanniu go running around by himself. But here you are. She didn't pay any attention to me at all. Well, let's climb that north mountain."

Old Li and the boy walked down the village street.

"I haven't much more time in this world, but it looks like I won't even die in my own bed," the old man complained. "What kind of evil spirits are these Whites to come and oppress us?" He kept turning his head to glance back at his cave-dwelling, where maize and peppers used to hang from the caves every year. It had been his home for generations. How he hated to leave.

There was a burst of rifle fire, shouts, the whinny of horses. A mounted troop galloped into the village, shattering its death-like stillness and startling the birds in the trees into terrified heavenward flight.

An enemy reconnaissance detachment.

No chance to get away now. The old man hurriedly led the little boy back to their home and barred the door.

Shuanniu watched through a crack. Suddenly he gave a frightened cry.

"It's bad, Grandpa! They're carrying rifles and trussed chickens. These soldiers must be Whites. We can't escape, Grandpa. What'll we do?" The child's heart was beating wildly.

"What are you looking at?" old Li growled, his eyes glaring. "Go hide behind the stove."

"Grandpa. . . ."

The old man raised his hand threateningly, indicating to the boy to be silent. Outside a rifle cracked sharply. Shuanniu trembled from head to foot.

"What are we going to do, Grandpa?"

" 'Do, do' — you just be still! This is the way things are, and we've got to face the facts. If we can't escape then we can't, and that's all there is to it. Shuanniu, our army's on the other side of those north mountains. These White savages won't have their way for long. If they ask you, don't say a word about where our troops are. Remember, no matter what happens, don't tell the enemy the truth. I'll break your legs if you do!"

Calamity had fallen on his head, but old Li felt strangely peaceful. Sternly, he sat down on the edge of the brick oven-bed and rested his chin on the staff which he held between his knees. His beard trembled slightly.

Shuanniu's large black eyes darted from one place to another. He was becoming more and more frightened. "Grandpa," he cried, hugging his grandfather's legs tightly.

The door was knocked down with a splintering crash, and half a dozen ugly-looking enemy soldiers strode into the room.

"Outside! We've got some questions to ask. Move fast or I'll shoot!"

A rifle bolt slid with a metallic scrape. Old Li found the shiny point of a bayonet a few inches from his eyes. Everything seemed to go dark and the room revolved. Supporting himself with one hand against the wall, the old man stood up. KMT soldiers were marauding about the interior of the room, knocking over the cauldron rack, upsetting the swill pan. Juice from a smashed pickling jug spread over the floor like blood.

Old Li set his jaw and regarded the enemy soldiers contemptuously with a look that seemed to say — You don't bother me. We peasants follow the Communist Party. We carved out this Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region with a couple of old vegetable knives!

The enemy platoon sergeant grabbed the old man by the collar and shook him. "Where are the peasants hiding?"

"Ah . . . ah . . ." the old man fought for breath. "The peasants? . . . Run away from the bandits."

The sergeant swore. "What bandits?"

Old Li was breathing hard. He looked pointedly at the bundles of loot the enemy soldiers had tucked in their belts. "Who knows?" he said coldly.

"Are there bandits near this village?" asked the sergeant in a softer tone.

"Bandits?" scoffed old Li. "Not only haven't there been any bandits in our border region for over ten years — you could drop gold on the road and no one would touch it."

"Don't try and play dumb with me," snarled the sergeant. "I'm asking you about the Communist army, the Eighth Route Army."

The old man put one hand behind his back and held on to the wall with the other. "Oh, the Eighth Route. We peasants don't know anything about military matters. Ghosts and troops move in mysterious ways."

Swearing, the enemy soldiers punched him, beat him down with their rifle butts. The little boy threw himself on his grandfather and wept piercingly.

Old Li tried to stand but his legs wouldn't support him. His eyes were blurred and his head was spinning. Gritting his teeth, he clutched his grandson's shoulder and put all his effort into trying to rise.

"When a man dies, Shuanniu, he ought to die on his feet," he rasped. "Help me, Shuanniu. Grandpa's a man with the yellow earth of the grave on his neck. He's seen the old society and he's seen the new. Shuanniu, Grandpa's lived long enough."

Shakily, the old man dragged himself to a standing position. Deep lines framed his tightly clamped mouth. His beard trembled. His gaze was fierce, penetrating, icy. He looked so formidable that the enemy soldiers unconsciously fell back half a step.

"Tie the old devil up," shouted the sergeant.

In an instant, old Li's hands were tied behind his back. Shuanniu hugged the old man's legs for dear life. It made old Li's heart ache to see the boy so distressed.

Then an enemy captain arrived. He had a small head and a receding chin. After a few words with the sergeant and a crafty glance at the old man, he led Shuanniu to one side.

Old Li spat the blood from his mouth. His bushy eyebrows worked spasmodically and he called stridently, "Shuanniu."

An enemy soldier struck him across the face. "What are you trying to signal!"

Blood dripped from old Li's nose. He was panting hard. But he raised his head and stood firm. Today, now, he no longer felt like an old man.

"We're Eighth Route Army men," the captain said to the boy with feigned kindliness. "We lost our unit when the Kuomintang attacked Yanan. Can you tell us where the Eighth Route is? Tell us. I'll give you money, I'll give you candy. Speak up."

"You're not Eighth Routers," retorted Shuanniu. "I've seen them lots of times. They never hit people or swear at them or steal chickens. They're nice."

The captain dug both hands into his trouser pockets and stood with his legs apart. He looked the child over, then pushed his American-style officer's cap to the back of his head and lit a cigarette.

"You're wrong, little brat," he said, the cigarette dangling from his lips. "If we're not Eighth Routers, what are we?"

"Whites!"

"What do you mean — 'Whites'?" someone asked.

"The reactionary army," Shuanniu replied timidly.

The captain's face darkened. With one kick he sent the boy sprawling to the ground, then kneeled on his chest and slapped him viciously, again and again.

Shuanniu screamed and cried for his grandfather.

An overpowering emotion rose in the old man's chest. "You don't know anything," he shouted. "Whatever they ask you, let me tell them!"

Several enemy soldiers ran over to old Li. "You old carrion," snarled one of them. "Why didn't you say so in the first place and save yourself all this trouble? Now talk!"

They untied his bonds. The old man staggered over to Shuanniu and wrapped the child in his arms. Tears in his eyes, he hid his face behind the child's back until he regained control of himself.

What shall I say? That our army is behind the north mountains? Not in a million years, never! But Shuanniu is so young. What if he lets something slip. . . .

Memories flooded back to the old man. How he fought in the local revolution more than a dozen years before, how they had beaten the local tyrants, divided up the land. . . . Time and again he had heard peasants say, "We'll stay in our border region as long as we live, and even after we're dead our spirits will never want to leave it!".

Our troops are just beyond those mountains, he said to himself. They're going to make it hot for this gang of murdering bandits! The thought gave him strength. Maybe our men would come charging down and save him and his little grandson.

A KMT soldier pulled out a banknote. "Old man, we'll make it worth your while. Tell us where the Eighth Route Army is. Just point, that'll be enough."

Just point? You want me to sell my conscience? Pigs! You've got the wrong man! An enemy soldier noticed Shuanniu's automatic glance towards the north.

"Are they up there?" he asked the child.

Old Li's heart gave a leap, but his face didn't move a muscle. "They were there for the past two days, but last night they crossed the Yanshui River and went south," he volunteered. "There were only seven of them. Must have been guerillas. Didn't look like much of a force."

"Corporal," shouted the enemy captain. "Take this old man up to the north mountain and look around. Watch him carefully. Don't let him get away. It's impossible to find a guide in this damn Red area."

Old Li's face was waxy and thin, but his eyes shone with strength and self-respect. As he walked painfully up the uneven path, he fixed his gaze on the withered but tough branches of a few wild date trees further up the slope, reaching into the sky, fearless of the cold wind. Shuanniu held the rear edge of the old man's padded jacket in a deathly

grip. The child was staring blankly; he had been scared out of his wits.

With every step forward he took, the old man's heart contracted. He seemed to be moving step by step closer to his grave. But he kept repeating to himself — Lawless beasts! You'll never get even half a word out of me!

The enemy soldiers fired repeatedly up the mountain and exchanged timorous glances with one another. These hills and ravines seemed like some huge mouth, ready to swallow them down in one gulp. To bolster his own courage, one of the KMT soldiers raged at the old man:

"Get a move on! Faster, faster!"

Other soldiers joined in the chorus, yelling, swearing.

Making a great martial display, the enemy squad guarding the old man and the little boy proceeded away from the village. The sound of their firing caught the attention of a group of our scouts.

The scouts were concealed on a slope near the mouth of Qinghua Gorge, observing the flat expanse of the river valley with its green young wheat and the sparkling waters of the Yanshui. A buried line connected their field phone with a headquarters to the north. Artfully camouflaged with bunches of long, wild grass, from a distance the men looked like a small thicket growing on the mountain-side.

They could see a reconnaissance detachment of forty or fifty enemy troops advancing through the groves along the sunken river banks. One squad halted beneath a tree and trained their field glasses on the slope where our scouts were hidden for a long time, then sent a few bullets whistling over the scouts' heads.

"Don't move," warned the leader of the scout platoon. "They're only testing a guess."

"I won't," promised one of the PLA men. "I'd just like to touch those bullets as they go by to take their temperature."

"Quiet," snapped the platoon leader. Then he drew a cold breath. "Look at that," he said softly.

The scouts rubbed their eyes. They peered at the enemy soldiers escorting the old man and the little boy.

"Strange. Where did they get that old peasant? He looks like the man who showed us the way early this morning." The scout who had spoken rapped his forehead. "What was his name now? Ah, yes — Li, his name is Li."

"You're crazy. Old Li would never let himself fall into the enemy's hands. He's a veteran revolutionary. He's had as much war experience as any of us."

"Attention!"

"Attention!" The scouts tensely passed their leader's whispered order along. The enemy detachment guarding the old man and the boy was approaching the foot of the mountain on which the scouts were hiding. Their bodies contracting, the scouts pressed themselves deeper into the ground.

"I'd love to take a shot at them!"

"We're in trouble, platoon leader. They're coming this way."

"No more talking. Make sure your safeties are closed tight." Biting his lip, the leader of the scout platoon watched the old man and the KMT detachment. His face was flushed and big beads of perspiration dripped from his forehead. Pulling out with his men would be easy enough, but they'd be giving away the position of our army, lying in ambush not far behind. Besides, he thought, that old man is the same as the other million and a half peasants in this region — he'd rather die than sell out our chances of victory.

But the enemy searchers kept coming closer to the foot of the slope. The leader of the scouts pushed his cap back from his steaming brow.

"From left to right," he hissed, "fall back one by one!"

The first scout on the left crawled quickly to the shelter of a mound. He was followed by the second man. . . .

"Halt!" The leader's voice shook a little with joy. The enemy detachment led by the old man and the boy had turned south. Now it forded the Yanshui River and began climbing the slope on the other side.

The scouts followed them with their field glasses. For a moment, the enemy search party was obscured by a mountaintop, then it reappeared on a still higher peak. Suddenly the old man halted, covered the child with his arms, and looked around at the KMT soldiers. Startled, they fell back a pace, then ran towards him. The old man crouched, picked up his grandson, strode forward and jumped off the edge of the cliff.

The enemy soldiers were stunned. When they recovered their wits they rushed to the precipice, fired their rifles and threw down several hand grenades. Then, glumly, they made their way back down the mountain.

Gripping their rifles, the scouts stared at the cliff from which the old man had leaped. Their leader's field glasses dropped from his hand and hung by the strap around his neck. From a sitting position, the platoon leader rose to his knees, and he dug his fingers into the shoulder of the scout beside him.

"Old neighbour," he said in a low voice, "that wonderful old neighbour. . . ."

At breakfast time that day, the KMT Thirty-first Brigade received a report from its reconnaissance detachment — "No sign of enemy activity ahead." Whereupon the brigade continued swaggering along the road in the direction of Qinghua Gorge.

8

FIRST Company, PLA, occupied the height nearest the mouth of the gorge. Battalion commander Liu telephoned them frequently from his command post to check on their observations.

Chengde, the political instructor of First Company, reminded the men behind the ridge to tighten their shoes. Dayong, company commander, stuck his pistol in the belt of his trousers. Crouching, he ran along behind the shelter of a low mound and gave his orders:

"Hand grenades ready. Don't let any earth get in the muzzle of your rifles. Keep calm. No firing till I give the order."

A serious, tense atmosphere spread across the battle area. It was silent as an old temple which no one has visited for hundreds of years.

Some men talked in whispers. Others squatted behind the mound taking turns puffing a precious cigarette. A few sat huddled, cradling their rifles, breathing softly.

"I wish the shooting would start. I'm pins and needles all over."

"My heart is beating like mad. It won't go back to normal till we rip into the enemy."

"Listen. You hear these hand grenades clinking against each other? They're saying they want a chance to speak their piece."

Suddenly three enemy fighter planes streaked across the sky. They circled several times over the Qinghua Gorge area, then made an exploratory strafing run along the gorge, and flew off.

The fighters' eyes trailed the planes until they disappeared.

"Attention. Enemy troops."

Although the command was spoken very low, many of the men heard it. More of them sensed it. Tense and excited, their hearts seemed ready to burst through their throats. The weather was cold, but the foreheads of the majority of the men were damp with perspiration.

Most excited were the PLA soldiers at the furthest observation outpost. It was ten o'clock in the morning. They saw a long yellow column of enemy troops enter the gorge. Behind the advance guard came many KMT soldiers, marching down the highway. Their pack animals were laden with mountain cannon, mortars and heavy machine-guns. Enemy officers sat astride their mounts, riding crops dangling from their wrists. How peaceful and idyllic. Like a tourist outing in the mountains. Some of the enemy officers cast uneasy glances at the heights flanking the gorge, but others sat their plodding horses with folded arms, deep in thought.

Platoon after platoon of enemy infantry marched by. The KMT soldiers were weighted down with heavy packs in addition to their rifles, and they walked bent forward at the waist, heads drooping. They looked exhausted. Some were using their rifles as shoulder poles, and carried officers' luggage tied to each end. Some ported light machine-guns from which they had not even troubled to remove the covers. One KMT soldier accidentally jabbed an officer's horse with his rifle and startled the beast. The officer turned around and beat the soldier about the head with his riding crop.

From a concealed position above the gorge, Dayong and several of his men watched the enemy filing by. Dayong's chest was pressed against the low breast-work, his head propped up by the fists supporting his chin, his eyes glaring down at the KMT warlord Hu Zongnan's bandits. These were the dogs who had occupied our Yanan, Chairman Mao's and the Central Committee's Yanan! Dayong ground his teeth, his face contorted with rage.

The cruelty of the enemy was hateful enough, but their pompous complacency was even harder to bear.

"Carve them to bits with our bayonets, then I'll feel a little better," said Ma Quanyou.

"Use our grenades, blast them into minced dog meat," was Ma Changsheng's comment.

Li Jiangguo swore in an uncontrollable fury.

"Keep your voices down," ordered Tiger Wang.

"Squad . . . squad leader . . .' began Ning Jinshan timidly.

Dayong quickly drew back into the position. "Don't make a sound — anyone."

The enemy had sent out detachments to cover both flanks, and they were proceeding along the heights on either side of the gorge. One of the detachments, with over a hundred men armed with tommy-guns, was nearing First Company's position. The KMT soldiers were shooting wildly in all directions, and yelling:

"Come out! Come out! Don't try to fool us. We know there aren't many of you!"

Dayong could see that some of his men were itching to open fire. But if that happened the enemy would draw in his head like a turtle. The victory they had been waiting for would fly away. All their sweat and blood of preparation would be completely wasted.

But the enemy kept coming closer and closer. . . .

Every second seemed a year.

Dayong clutched the cloth of his shirt with both hands.

His face was crimson. Great beads of perspiration dripped from his forehead.

What should they do? The enemy flanking guard was now only 300 yards from our camouflaged heavy machine-gun position . . . 250 yards. . . . Every PLA man held his breath, his eyes fixed on the advancing enemy detachment. If only they had a magic hood, like the one in the folk tales the men sometimes told during their rest sessions, to put over the enemy's head and blind them! But wishing was no good. The enemy were still coming on. If we don't open fire in another thirty seconds, it will be too late.

Then, when the KMT flank guard was only 180 yards from our heavy machine-guns, after firing a burst at random, it turned and passed to the right of our concealed forces. The enemy detachment crossed the summit, then followed along the ridge towards the north.

The PLA men blew out their breath; soft laughter was heard. Everyone had been highly tense and excited. It was only now they realized that their perspiration had soaked through the backs of their cotton-padded uniforms.

Gaily, the young soldiers jostled and poked one another. They felt happy, affectionate. The warm rays of the sun brightened the misty battlefield, the jolly faces. It shone on the ponderous, solemn big artillery pieces, and on the agile, mischievous machine-guns.

"My cotton uniform is sticking to me like an icicle," said Tiger Wang with a grin. "I say that enemy detachment deserves a commendation."

Jiangguo immediately supported him. "We're always saying the KMT is rotten and useless. But you see, some of them are not so useless."

"Now what are you supposed to mean by that?" Quanyou demanded.

"How can you ask? Didn't that gang that just went blundering by help the Chinese revolution? Sometimes their uselessness is very useful. If they weren't so dumb and useless, they'd never have missed us."

The men stifled their laughter.

"The way I see it," drawled Tiger Wang, wiping the sweat from his head, "even if old Truman gives the KMT his whole treasury, he can't make a human being out of Chiang Kai-shek."

Changsheng was observing his own chest. "A mangy dog can't support a crumbling wall," he quipped, without looking up.

Someone started an argument about "luck." A few insisted there was such a thing, citing as proof strange things that had happened to them on the battlefield. But most of the men maintained that anyone who believed in luck was a "superstitious melon-head."

"Comrades, attention," company commander Dayong suddenly cried in a low voice.

The men stared. Almost all of the enemy brigade was now inside the gorge. It must have been about ten minutes later, when a machine-gun began to chatter at the northern end of the gorge, five or six miles beyond.

Exploding rifle grenades immediately filled the air, belching black smoke. Rifles and artillery started to roar. Every weapon we had poured down its fire on the enemy. The KMT soldiers scattered in panic. In Qinghua Gorge rose a pall of smoke.

"Charge!"

"Comrades! Charge!"

Like a mountain torrent, the PLA men flooded down into the valley.

Bugle calls echoed on the heights, blaring their stirring commands. A young bugler stood on the highest summit, head back, blowing with all his might, the bit of red silk tied to his trumpet streaming in the wind.

The mission of Zhao Jin's regiment was to block the enemy's rear. His unit rushed towards the mouth of the gorge. Victory was in sight, and they let nothing stop them. They jumped ravines, they slid down cliffs.

First Company was running in the lead, the two platoons led by Dayong being the furthest out in front. A third platoon under company political instructor Chengde raced along Dayong's right flank. A man running beside Chengde shouted in a high voice:

"Cutting off the enemy's retreat means victory!"

The PLA soldiers turned their heads to look. It was Wei Yi, regimental chief of staff, his face wet with perspiration, leading a detachment to the right of First Company. Flying along First Company's left flank were Second and Third Companies under the command of battalion C.O. Liu. The battalion commander was in shirt-sleeves rolled up to the elbow. For some reason he was swearing vigorously.

Thick clouds of dust covered the slopes. Rifle and artillery fire blended into a wild blur of noise that shook the mountains.

From a rise, Zhao Jin directed the battalion's fire. A series of rifle volleys slashed through the enemy's retreat route like a spear. Artillery shells of many calibres burst in the mouth of the gorge, raising a mountain of dust and smoke that climbed to the heavens, a pall so dense that no bird could pierce it.

Although the gorge didn't appear very wide from the heights, the PLA men had to race two or three miles to a point where they could seal the entrance.

For seven miles, the entire length of the gorge was packed with enemy troops, flowing from side to side like a tide. First they rushed to the eastern side of the gorge, and were met with a crushing volley of rifle fire. Then they turned and made for the western side, only to be showered with hand grenades. Artillery shells bursting among them terrified their mules and horses. The animals reared and trampled in their frantic efforts to get away. Some KMT soldiers crawled along the sunken banks of the river, firing stubbornly. Some, with fixed bayonets, savagely met our charging men.

The battlefield rang with the calls of the PLA men — "Surrender and live!" and the clash of rifle butts on bayonets.

Zhao Jin, regimental C.O., leading a battalion, came tearing down the mountain to reinforce the units fighting in the gorge. Plunging into the midst of the enemy, he and his troops encountered fierce resistance every step of the way. In some places, only one man remained of an enemy squad, but that one fought desperately, refusing to give up his weapon except as a last resort.

Driving north, Zhao Jin came across a captured enemy officer — the commanding general of the KMT Thirty-first Brigade. The man was standing woodenly at the edge of the road with both hands hanging limply by his sides. His face twitching and running with cold sweat, his eyes lacklustre, the officer was angrily muttering, "Is this how it ends? Is it all over so quickly?" He seemed unwilling to accept what had happened to him. Abruptly, he squatted down on his heels and grasped his head in his hands. "I can't believe it. It's too quick," he said furiously. "We didn't even have time to get into position. The whole brigade . . . the whole brigade. . . . It can't be. It's impossible!"

Pockets of enemy troops were holding out in gullies, ravines, mountain clefts. East and west, rifles spat, grenades exploded. Enemy planes circled overhead, but they neither bombed nor strafed, for they couldn't make head or tail of what was going on in Qinghua Gorge.

Zhao Jin's men had captured over three hundred enemy prisoners, and the regimental commander ordered that they be assembled together.

The PLA soldiers loaded themselves with as many captured belts of ammunition as they could carry. Some cradled brand-new American tommy-guns taken from the enemy. Addressing one of the shiny automatic weapons affectionately, a PLA man said:

"You've come a long hard way from America, pal. Now you can help me serve the people."

Smiling broadly, Brigadier Chen approached. The men crowded around him.

"Short and sweet," he commended them. "You finished off 4,000 of the enemy in two hours; not one got away. That's what I call drawing the net tight."

The men were practically dancing for joy. Everyone talked of how many prisoners he had taken, how many arms he had seized. Men rode astride captured enemy big guns. Bearers piled their stretchers with KMT rifles, ammunition.

Then came the order — withdraw immediately. Escorting their prisoners, carrying their new arms and equipment, the PLA men sang as they marched:

Chiang Kai-shek, our chief of supply,
Has sent us more guns from his U.S. ally.

When the KMT reinforcements arrived a few hours later, except for enemy corpses and the American-made helmets which littered the ground, Qinghua Gorge was empty.

The People's Liberation Army was gone like a gust of wind, leaving no shadow or trace, to where no one knew.

News of the crushing enemy defeat at Qinghua Gorge spread with lightning speed throughout the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region. People counted on their fingers — the victory had been won exactly six days after our army had evacuated Yanan.

Chapter Two

Panlongzhen

1

SOLDIERS Li Jiangguo and Ning Jinshan stood guard beneath a couple of willows on a hilltop. Spring had crept into the twigs of the trees. Warm gentle breezes brought the fragrance of apricot blossoms. Nearby, two rabbits, nimble and alert, darted out to nibble the tender new grass.

Rifle on his shoulder, Jinshan moved listlessly, like someone in need of sleep. He stared at the surrounding mountains, stretching interminably towards the horizon.

"Miserable hole," he said to himself. "Of all places to have to fight a war. Day and night — march, march, march, never any end to it."

Jiangguo, broad, tall — he was a head higher and a shoulder wider than Jinshan — was also examining the scenery. To him the undulating brown hills were like the waves of a flood, waves that were engulfing the enemy troops invading north Shaanxi. He grinned.

"Real pretty, these mountains. Keep the enemy busy doing lots of climbing."

Jinshan clicked his heels. "Yessir."

It had just stopped raining and the air was fresh and clear. Jiangguo breathed deeply. He felt strong, happy. The mountains and valleys, the water flowing in the ravines, the young crops swaying in the breeze — he loved them all. Grasping his rifle more firmly, he expanded his chest and looked off into the distance. A moment or two later, he burst into song, his left hand conducting an imaginary chorus of voices, his right keeping time on his rifle butt. He sang in a bright strong voice, his head rocking with the cadence:

The red flag flutters, so proud, so proud,
Magpies chirrup, so gay and loud,
Qinghua Gorge,
Yangma River,
In both battles we fought well.
Two enemy brigades we wiped right out,
Tell the news with a happy shout.

Jinshan couldn't help envying Jiangguo's boundless energy and good cheer. But he didn't understand. Marching constantly through the mud and the rain, his uniform reduced to tatters, his toes poking through worn-out shoes — what was Jiangguo so damn happy about? Jiangguo's eyes met his. Jinshan had a feeling that the big soldier was reading his mind.

Jinshan laughed awkwardly. "You're always so cheerful."

"Huh! And you're always so dry and gloomy. Sure I'm cheerful, and so's everyone else in our company. We made another great show at Yangma River. Finished off the enemy's whole 135th Brigade. That battle was only eighteen days after Qinghua Gorge, and only about four weeks since we left Yanan. Not bad! If we keep going at this rate, it won't be long before the enemy has to close shop altogether." Jiangguo paused. "An old veteran always can tell what the high command is planning. Jinshan, I'll bet you we're going to have another battle real soon."

Jinshan's heart skipped a beat. "You think so?"

"Think so? I know so. Am I ever wrong? Don't you

remember what I told you just before the Yangma River battle? Jinshan, I said, stop your babbling; the enemy's sure to fall into our trap. You didn't say anything, but I knew what you were thinking — that Jiangguo is always blowing up a big breeze. But what happened? Didn't we wipe out four or five thousand enemy troops in a little under six hours? Never mind; let bygones be bygones. But, Jinshan, you'd better believe in the way we fight. Otherwise you're going to go off the track."

Jinshan brought his heels together sharply. "Yessir."

"And cut out that blasted 'yessir' stuff," Jiangguo said irritably. " 'Yessir, yessir.' To a comrade you're supposed to say exactly what's on your mind. Anybody who thinks one thing and says another, stinks."

Jiangguo went back to his song. His gaiety flowed into Jinshan's heart like a warm current. From his years of experience as a soldier of Chiang Kai-shek, Jinshan knew that the blind plunging about of the KMT army was stupid. The PLA is sure to win, in the long run, he thought. If others can stick it out, why can't I? I'm as much a man as the next fellow. He felt firm and determined. But then a big hand seemed to smother him, blind his eyes. His heart contracted. Jiangguo was singing:

Qinghua Gorge,
Yangma River,
In both battles we fought well.
Two enemy brigades we wiped right out. . . .

He sings with such verve and joy, thought Jinshan. It was true we had fought well. In fact it was in those two battles that he, Jinshan, had come to realize that the tactics of the PLA were extremely effective. But after each engagement he had felt more and more flurried, exasperated, scared.

We put thousands of the enemy out of action, but why is it that no sooner do we finish cleaning up the battlefield than we get orders to march? Old Lord of the Heavens, this awful war of movement. We keep moving and moving till my legs are walked down to the stumps.

Jinshan would never forget the past month. Day and night, they ran rings around the enemy on the mountain-tops. When the enemy came towards this summit, we moved to that one. And how many times had we struck suddenly in the black of night, smashing the enemy with hand grenades, bayonets, rifle butts. How many times had we marched, eating one meal, skipping the next, scaling heights, attacking, groping through the darkness. A whole month of forced marches, rain, fatigue, heat, cold, blood, sweat, fire. . . .

He wanted to go the same road as Jiangguo and the others. Yet something held him back. He couldn't seem to close the gap between them, even though he was only a step or two behind.

When they were relieved by the next guard shift, Jiangguo and Jinshan walked towards the village in which they were quartered, half-way down the slope.

Jiangguo pointed at a man carrying buckets from either end of a shoulder pole. "You know who that is? I'll bet you anything it's Ma Changsheng. How I can tell from so far? By the angle of his neck. Ever since his neck was wounded, he's been holding it a little crooked."

Jiangguo told the story of how Changsheng had been wounded several years before — where it happened, what was the situation at that time, how brave Changsheng had been.

"Yessir, yessir," Jinshan nodded automatically. What a bore, he thought. Isn't he ever going to finish? He's flat as dishwater.

Blithely unaware, Jiangguo chattered on. "Changsheng dug coal in a mine ever since he was a kid. Born and bred in the working class, that man. Just look at him. Not tall, but a back as flat as a board, red cheeks, handsome. Arms like rafters, fists like garlic pots, and *is* he strong. Why there's nobody can beat him. When we fought the Japanese, there wasn't one of them that could stand up to him in bayonet fighting."

"That's obvious," Jinshan agreed politely. "He may act a little stubborn, but he's really very good-hearted."

"That's right, that's right. You don't want to pay any attention to the way he talks. Sometimes, obstinate like, he pokes his lips out so far they can knock you down. You'd think he was mad about something. As a matter of fact, he's a damn fine comrade. I really like that fellow, no fooling."

Approaching Changsheng, they could see that his forehead was beaded with perspiration. He had been carrying fertilizer to the fields for one of the peasants.

Jiangguo hailed him. "Comrade Changsheng, don't wear yourself out."

"Work isn't supposed to be any picnic," retorted Changsheng. "You can't work without getting into a sweat."

Jiangguo gave Jinshan a wink. "You see what I mean?" he said in an undertone. "My blessed ancestors! That's the way he talks — surly, as if you owed him rent."

The men of First Company were quartered in a couple of ramshackle caves in which the peasants stored their hay. Although it was likely that the brigade would move on at any moment, the PLA soldiers, as was their habit, kept the caves scrupulously clean. Ammunition belts, hand grenade sacks and utility bags were neatly hung on the wall. Knapsacks, all properly tied, rested one against another in a straight row on the floor.

Some of the men were reading. Others were chatting or writing letters. Tiger Wang sat in a corner sucking a pipe which had long since gone out. He wore an enigmatic smile, as if enjoying secrets known to him alone. Quiet, retiring, Tiger always listened to his comrades' words thoughtfully and with care. His manner invited confidences, but the men knew that boasting could never fool him. Though he often appeared stolid to the point of dullness, yet there was something magnetic about him. Even on first meeting, you immediately felt he was an old and intimate friend.

Near the mouth of the cave a few men were gathered around Ma Quanyou. The fiery Quanyou had drawn a big circle on the earthen floor and was excitedly proclaiming:

"The enemy have forced their way in, but they won't be able to get out. The deeper they advance, the deeper the trouble they're in."

Entering the door, Jiangguo shouted, "Report! You've put it very well, Comrade Quanyou. You're going to smash Chiang Kai-shek's cooking pot — I'll stake my head on it."

Jinshan came into the cave next, and lay down on the hay without even removing his ammunition belt. Tiger Wang thought he wasn't feeling well and went over to see what was wrong. He felt Jinshan's forehead and chafed his hands, patiently questioning him all the while.

Like a whirlwind, Jiangguo hung his ammunition belt on a wooden peg and rushed to join Quanyou's group.

"The enemy's looking for our main force all over for a showdown," Quanyou was saying. "They're really having a rough time. Their whole army is travelling light. Each man carries his own provisions. Over a hundred thousand troops divided into separate columns, each column marching

in a formation ten or twelve miles square. They stay off the main roads and move only in the mountains. Every day they march, every night they make camp grinding out about ten miles a day. They rush around like blind men, always grabbing the empty air, always getting jabbed and poked, never able to find our main force. But we — I'm not talking about when we lay low — whenever we stick out a hand, we grab them. One thing's plain from these last few engagements — Hu Zongnan's got flour paste where his brains ought to be. The way I see it, if the enemy wants a showdown, let's give it to them. If we don't beat 'em it'll be mighty peculiar."

Quanyou sounded ready to go right out and swallow the enemy alive.

"A showdown?" Tiger Wang slowly tapped out his pipe against the sole of his shoe. "Listen to me, chum. It's true the enemy fights pretty clumsy, but to finish off the whole lot of them we've still got plenty of sweating to do."

The other men didn't agree with Quanyou either:

"General Peng says now that we've won a couple of victories we've got to be more cautious than ever. Where do you come off wanting a showdown now?"

"He's running a fever. He doesn't even understand why we're fighting a war of movement."

"Don't blame the poor guy. He just doesn't have any mind for strategy," was Jiangguo's conclusion.

Quanyou scowled, the scar on his cheek livid. "Sure, sure," he yelled. "Crawling along at the rate you want, even eight generations from now we still won't retake Yanan. You all make me sick."

Jiangguo held up his hands for silence. "When we discuss anything with Quanyou, we must be prepared to counterattack. How about letting me do it for you? I'm always the first to suffer anyhow. What's a little extra trouble to me?" Clowning, he picked up two small stone slabs to serve as rhythm clappers, rolled up his sleeves, cleared his throat. He danced comically in time to his own beat as he recited:

General Peng has spread a big net,
In the mountains we hide and wait,
When the enemy stumble into the net
We'll have prisoners and guns in spate!

One of Jiangguo's appreciative audience handed him an already rolled cigarette; another man proffered him a bowl of drinking water. Jiangguo sipped the water with the delicacy of a tea-taster. Lighting the cigarette, he sat down on his knapsack, his back hunched. Then he concentrated hard, pulling a long face as he sought to compose another verse. He was stopped by Tiger Wang:

"Easy there, Jiangguo. Don't strain yourself."

Everybody laughed.

"Tiger's guessed that I've shot my bolt," Jiangguo admitted. "Let's stop the nonsense and talk seriously for a minute. It's getting on to summer. I think we ought to have another big battle before the weather gets too hot."

Quanyou leaped to his feet. He leaned forward aggressively. "Right. Let's write a request to the high command. Say we want to fight right now."

Jiangguo clutched him in mock alarm. "Not so fast," he begged. "If you gouge out Chiang Kai-shek's heart and liver, Truman will cry himself to death. I can't be responsible for that."

In the whole group the most respected man was Tiger Wang. The hottest argument could be raging, with the contestants shouting themselves red in the face, nobody willing to give an inch. But Tiger, in his slow calm way, had only

to offer a word or two, and the clouds of strife immediately dispersed.

Now he decided to intervene. "Jiangguo," he said, "you're pounding that drum off the beat and getting everyone out of step. Writing a request is a good idea." He produced a small notebook and carefully tore out a sheet of paper. Then, licking the point of his pencil, he said with a grin, "Come on, fellows. Sign up." His voice was so low you'd think he hadn't eaten for three days.

The men all eagerly crowded round to sign the request, some of the younger ones deliberately jostling their mates and climbing on their shoulders. They hemmed in Tiger Wang as if trying to snatch something that might fly away in the wink of an eye.

A clear voice rose above the cheerful racket. "Count me in, too."

Standing in the doorway was Dayong, the company commander. The men snapped to attention, their chests still heaving, eyes shining with excitement, faces flushed.

Dayong leaned in, a hand on each side of the doorway. "So you want to fight, comrades?" he said with laughing eyes. "That's fine — because we're going into battle very soon."

Giving no further details, Dayong then left with Chengde, the company's political instructor, for regimental headquarters. A meeting of battalion officers and above was in session. No one could guess why these two officers of company rank had been summoned.

After greeting the assembled officers, Zhao Jin, commander of the regiment, led Dayong and Chengde to an adjoining cave.

Zhao Jin stood straight as a rod, his thumbs hooked in his belt. He looked exceptionally competent today. His eyes on the wall, he said:

"By pulling several hundred thousand of Hu Zongnan's troops into north Shaanxi, we've given Chiang Kai-shek quite a headache. You understand that, don't you?"

"I understand," said Dayong. He was standing at attention, facing Zhao Jin.

"Good. Understanding that, you'll be able to see things from the point of view of the whole country, not just your own little company. We're blackening Chiang Kai-shek's eyes on other battlefields too. He'd like to pull some of Hu Zongnan's troops out of here and send them to reinforce his armies in north China. But here in north Shaanxi, Hu Zongnan is riding the tiger. We're dragging his forces all over the place; we've got him staggering. The enemy's situation is critical. Our forces in Shanxi have just launched a big attack and liberated most of the south-western sector of that province. Our soldiers there can almost look west across the Yellow River and see Hu Zongnan's chief bastion — Xian. With the enemy rear being pressed so hard, Hu Zongnan is throwing in everything he's got to 'finish off the north Shaanxi campaign.' We have some plans of our own for the enemy. But before we can put them into effect, we have to send out one of our units to fight a most intriguing and important engagement."

Pacing the floor, Zhao Jin said in a rather doubtful voice, "Comrade Dayong, regiment is thinking of giving this job to you, but I don't know whether you can handle it."

I've fought under him all these years, yet he still doesn't seem to understand me, thought Dayong.

"I can, commander, I can," he assured Zhao Jin fervently. "Just give me the assignment. I swear to see it through." Dayong had all he could do to keep himself from waving his arms to add emphasis to his words.

Zhao Jin stared at him sceptically. "No, you won't do. Let me ask you — and you can stop frowning — You know how to fight to win, but do you know how to fight to lose? Can you fight to a miserable, crushing defeat?"

Fight to lose? What's wrong with the regimental C.O. today? Dayong's brain was in a whirl. But Zhao Jin didn't look as if he were joking. There was a stern expression on his thin, sharply angled face. Maybe I heard wrong, thought Dayong.

"You want me to fight a losing battle, commander?" he asked. "I've never had such an assignment before. Why? Why?"

"Why? Because those are my orders, and you carry them out." Zhao Jin spread a military map on the ground. "The enemy is searching for our main force to fight a showdown battle with us. Well, General Peng Dehuai has decided to give them the dish they're craving. That is to say, General Peng wants us to take one or two companies from each regiment and form a temporary regiment. This regiment is to stir up the enemy's main force which is here," he pointed at the Panlongzhen area on the map, "— and pull it north 140 miles to the counties of Suide and Mizhi. What's more, it must fool the enemy into thinking that we're on our last legs, that we want to cross the Yellow River."

Dayong was delighted to be given so interesting a task, but he was doubtful too. Would the enemy swallow the bait and follow him north?

Zhao Jin seemed to read his mind. "You have to learn how to analyze the enemy's character. All this time, they've been searching for our main force. They're nearly frantic by now. If you leave tracks behind as you travel north, the enemy's main force is sure to pursue. Of course, it all depends on how clever you are. You must keep fighting a rear guard action as you retreat. Your fighting must look like a fight; your retreating must look like a retreat. Otherwise the enemy will get suspicious. It would be best if you left a trail of worn-out shoes and clothing, broken rifles, torn ammunition belts. . . . If you capture any prisoners, let them escape right from under your nose. Let them go back and report the terrible state you're in. Dayong, there's a saying where I come from: 'Whatever you're peddling, sing your wares; whatever you're acting, look the part.' You can't play a straight game with the enemy — they won't let you. You'll have a very good man leading the temporary regiment — commander Wang, of X Regiment. He's got a whole bag full of tricks."

Zhao Jin gazed through the doorway at the distant heights. "Behind those mountains is Panlongzhen. If you like, after you've completed your mission, you and your men can stop there on your way back and see the sights."

"But Panlongzhen is occupied by the enemy."

"When are you going to get wise? After you leave here, we're going to let our machine-guns negotiate with the enemy a bit. I'm sure we can convince them to give the town to us. We're extremely interested in Panlongzhen, comrade. That's because in Panlongzhen the enemy has a large supply of munitions, grain and clothing all prepared for us." Zhao Jin's tone was completely serious. He hadn't the faintest trace of a smile.

"I'll inform the comrades of my company at once," said Dayong. "I'll have them get ready to march."

"Not so fast," said Zhao Jin. "We've already chosen two companies from Second Battalion. We were going to put the battalion's lieutenant-commander in charge of them, but he's been wounded. And we can't spare any other battalion commanders because we'll need them all for the Panlongzhen battle. So you lead the two companies. They'll take their orders from you."

Dayong looked at his company's political instructor, standing beside regimental commander Zhao Jin.

Chengde nodded. "Don't worry about a thing, Dayong. Our company'll do a bang-up job in the assault on Panlongzhen. We won't disgrace you."

2

RAIN fell heavily, obscuring the fields and mountains in a veil of misty white. Nothing could be seen clearly beyond twenty or thirty paces.

The two companies Dayong was commanding, together with eight other companies, set out from the Panlongzhen area. They headed due north, drawing after them the enemy's main force of more than 100,000 men.

On the afternoon of the third day, they fought an engagement with the pursuing KMT troops, slipped away and made a forced march of seven miles. The PLA men then camped in a small valley about seventy miles north-east of Yanan.

After sending out his guard patrols, Dayong descended the slope towards a village. He was covered with mud; rain streamed down his face. His heart was heavy, for his Fifth Company had suffered severe losses. Both the company's commander and political instructor had been killed. Dayong had just been talking with regimental commander Wang on the mountain-top. The C.O.'s eyes were sunken; his face was seared by the fires in his heart.

"This is a difficult mission indeed, Dayong," he had said, "extremely difficult. The enemy is very, very crafty."

As Dayong approached one of the village cave-dwellings, he heard the men discussing something inside. Some voices were high and excited, others agitated and disgruntled.

"I got a good look at the enemy today when we were breaking off the engagement. Like a swarm of locusts they were, crawling up those mountains. Then that storm burst, and the rain came down on 'em in buckets. They got a real soaking today."

"They sure did. And did you see the prisoners we captured? Looked half dead. Besides their weapons and ammo, they were carrying luggage, nine days' uncooked rations and prepared rations for three. They were bent hunchback with the stuff. Cotton-padded uniforms full of holes and tears — a pack of beggars, to the life. Hey! Another big rain like the one today and they won't look even human."

"What are you guys feeling so good about? Did you see the way we fought? Just when we're getting warmed up, commander Dayong orders us to fall back. Fall back, fall back. And the way we did it — in a wild scramble, like we'd just been defeated. If that doesn't make us look silly I don't know what does. I've seen plenty of company commanders, but never one that got rattled as easily as him."

"That's nothing compared to what happened to us. He made our squad drop four knapsacks and tear up our unit insignias and throw them on the ground. I love that shoulder patch more than life, but what could I do — orders are orders. One of our squad — a north Shaanxi man — is all worked up. 'Chairman Mao is still on this side of the Yellow River. How come we're going to be the first to cross? We've got guns in our hands. Why don't we stand and fight? If I die I'm going to die in the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region,' he says. But the way commander Dayong is operating — we don't know what to think."

"Fine veterans you are. Can't even figure out a little thing like that. He's putting on a big act. I can feel it in my bones."

Leaning against the earthen wall outside the door of the cave, Dayong was startled. What if the enemy can see through us too? he thought worriedly. He was about to enter the cave when the leader of the communications squad came running up.

"The assistant political instructor of Sixth Company is looking for you."

"Ask him to come to the cave on the left. Just a minute. Send a couple of messengers into the valley to spread the word among the local peasants that our army has come back. And tell them to do it quietly. They're not to go yelling all around the place. I won't be easy on any man who frightens the old neighbours."

A few minutes later Wei Gang entered the cave where Dayong was waiting for him. "Finally caught up with you," he shouted cheerfully. Wei Gang was mud-spattered from head to foot, water dripped from the peak of his cap, a cocked Mauser pistol was stuck in his belt.

"On our way back from posting our guards we wiped out a gang of enemy scouts in plain clothes. Comrades in the local guerilla unit helped us. The enemy is real tricky. Their scouts were driving donkeys laden with grain and fodder. If anyone should ask them where they were going, they could say, 'Delivering provisions to the Eighth Route Army.' But they weren't tricky enough. We spotted them and wiped them out and brought back the grain. Go on out and take a look at it. It'll do your heart good." His eyes shining, Wei Gang was almost dancing for joy.

The enemy's trying very hard to find out what we're up to, thought Dayong. I'd better report that news to regimental commander Wang right away.

He clapped Wei Gang on the back. "Nice work. The comrades in the guerillas?"

"Outside bringing in the grain."

"Messenger," yelled Dayong, "tell Fifth Company to send a squad to move the grain in. Invite the comrades of the guerilla detachment to dry their clothes by the fire. On the double."

Wei Gang was so pleased he couldn't sit still. He had been in a successful encounter with the enemy, and Dayong had praised him. He took off his shirt and revolved his arms and jumped up and down to get warm.

"This job of pulling the enemy north has taken five years off my life," he said. "It's too much of a strain. Right this minute our main force is attacking Panlongzhen. Soldier against soldier, general against general — now that's the kind of fighting I like."

"Too much of a strain, is it?" retorted Dayong. "Only simple-minded people rely solely on muscle to win." He looked at the tall, stalwart Wei Gang, the young fellow's broad, thick chest, and was reminded of himself. Two or three years ago he had been just like Wei Gang — impetuous, full of fire. Dayong was beginning to take a great liking to him. The youngster strongly resembled his brother Wei Yi, the regiment's chief of staff.

"You're as tall as Wei Yi," said Dayong, "and you've got the same zest."

"Being born of the same mother, there's nothing strange about that," replied Wei Gang. He shook his head impatiently. "Don't talk about him. My brother is a chief of staff, a high-ranking officer. He's nothing to do with me."

Dayong was both amused and puzzled. Wei Gang looked so young and naive. "You seem to have it in for your brother," Dayong ventured.

"He makes me so mad my stomach rumbles. You know he was badly wounded in the Yangma River battle. I ran ten miles to see him in the hospital. At first we got along fine, but it didn't take ten sentences before we were arguing. All I said was — You ought to stay in the hospital a few more days and get your strength back. He nearly snapped my head off. Said he had joined the army to fight, not to lie around wrinkling bedding. He makes me so damn mad."

Dayong burst into laughter. Before he could reply, someone outside called to him.

"Commander Dayong, commander Dayong."

Hurrying to the door, Dayong collided with a man coming in. The arrival was about thirty, tall, wearing a white towel turban and carrying a knapsack and a pistol. He looked as if he had taken more than one tumble in the soupy mud.

Dayong examined him carefully for a moment, then grasped him by the shoulder.

"Aren't you district chief Li? What are you doing with a gun? Don't you remember me? I met you in the Qinghua Gorge battle. You were leading a stretcher outfit."

Li Yushan rested one foot on the edge of the brick oven-bed as he wiped the rain from his face with the towel.

"Quite a storm. Commander Dayong — no, I'll just call you Dayong. 'Strangers once met; twice met, old friends.' Yes, we talked together at Qinghua Gorge, Dayong. It's only about a month. I'm not a district chief any more; I'm the leader of a guerilla detachment. We've got a fine bunch of young fellows, and we skip and jump all over these hills. Now what about those sacks of millet we've just captured? Do we treat them as the army's or the guerillas'? If the army gets 'em, then you've got to give me one clip of Mauser bullets for every sack."

"Li, old man, what's all this 'yours' and 'mine' business? 'The stew in the pot is ready to share.' Aren't we all one family?"

Li Yushan punched Dayong's chest. "I'm kidding you. We're here to supply grain to the army; that's our job. Dayong, when the people in these parts heard the enemy was coming this way, they hid all their clothing and grain and household utensils — every single bit. It's all been swept clean. If we hadn't brought you these sacks of millet, your cauldrons would be empty today. The only thing they'd be any good for would be to bang on, like gongs."

3

THE last ten days of April it rained steadily day and night. A perpetual mist covered the mountains. The clouds came lower and lower, until they threatened to press directly on your head. The PLA men skidded and tumbled on the slippery mountain slopes. Even when they squatted quietly in the damp caves, they had difficulty breathing the soggy air.

After the bulk of the enemy army was drawn north away from Panlongzhen, our main force moved up to encircle the area of the town. For several days, the PLA men had been busy preparing for battle. They built scaling ladders, tied sticks of dynamite into bundles, polished their weapons, held meetings on tactics. Officers of platoon rank and above tramped through the mud and rain several times a day to study the terrain and the enemy's fortifications.

On the first of May, while Brigadier Chen was leading a group of officers in an examination of the terrain, he was notified to report to Field Army headquarters at once.

That morning, General Peng Dehuai, commanding general of the North-west Field Army and deputy commander-in-chief of the People's Liberation Army, had stood in the rain on a mountain not far from Panlongzhen observing the enemy's major positions. Later, he returned to the peasant's cave-home where he was quartered. The wooden frames of the door and windows had been burned by the enemy for fuel. Inside the cave-dwelling on the right was a bed made of a few boards, covered with some simple bedding. Military maps were pinned on the wall in the rear of the cave.

North-west Field Army H.Q. had called a meeting of officers of brigade rank and above for the afternoon, but General Peng had summoned Brigadier Chen to appear at ten in the morning. The general wanted to talk to him first because Chen's brigade had the job of taking Jiyu Ridge — the height controlling the main approaches to Panlongzhen.

At the door of the general's quarters, Chen twisted the rain out of his cap and put it on again. "Report," he called. There was no response from the cave.

But his escort said General Peng had come back, thought the brigadier. He was about to inquire from the staff officers standing in the courtyard when he heard the voice of the general speaking inside his quarters, "We'll strike them here . . . and here. . . . Ah, that's right."

Chen looked in through the door and found General Peng deep in thought.

The general was seated on a stone beside a small fire. His clothes were soaking wet. His cap, resting on a nearby pile of brushwood, was still dripping. He sat with both hands clasped around a knee, his shoulders swaying slightly. His head was tilted back, his eyes were closed.

"Report," said Chen in a low voice. He came softly into the cave.

"Ah, you're here. Hurry and get out of those wet clothes." General Peng walked over to his bed and got an old padded coat. "Put this on," he said to Chen.

He talked with Chen for a few minutes, then examined the map and calculated quietly on his fingers. Concentrating, he lightly paced the floor.

The successive victories of the forces under General Peng after the KMT army occupied Yanan took quite a bit of arrogance out of the enemy. Now the general had pulled their main force on a false lead all the way to Suide, and Panlongzhen was left relatively isolated. Peng undoubtedly was confident he could take the town. But the brigadier saw in him no signs of elation. In fact, he appeared cautious and thoughtful.

Peng led Chen to a map of north Shaanxi and pointed out the enemy positions and the way their forces were moving. He turned to look at the brigadier to see whether Chen was grasping everything he was saying.

Chen felt the general's glance penetrate straight into his mind. No weakness or doubts could be concealed from such a gaze. Standing quiet and serious before the map, he gave you the feeling of great strength. But there was nothing cold about him. On the contrary, you knew he was concerned about you, like a patient teacher.

Even though this was to be our forces' first direct assault in the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region on a large fortified base, even though our army had little experience in this kind of operation, standing beside General Peng, Chen had not the slightest doubt that we would take Panlongzhen.

The general addressed a word or two to Chen from time to time, but for the most part he was sunk in his own contemplations.

Brigadier Chen, meeting the general alone for the first time, found his conduct a trifle strange. Chen himself, whenever he assigned missions to his officers, repeated his analysis of the situation and his instructions several times, then had his officers recite them back to make sure he was understood. But the general, calmly and quietly concentrating, said very little.

Suddenly a grey-haired old peasant appeared in the doorway of the cave. Leaning on his staff, the old man put his head in and said to General Peng:

"If you want any drinking water, comrade, just let me know. You don't have to be bashful in your own home." He shook his head. "Ah, you're always so busy."

The general walked over to his host. "I won't trouble you, old friend." And in a kindly voice, he asked, "Did you want to see me about something?"

The old man again shook his head. "No, nothing."

No sooner had the old peasant gone than three children came running in. The eldest was about six; the youngest couldn't have been more than four. The orderly who had pursued them to the door glared menacingly and called in a whisper:

"Come on out, you little devils."

Completely ignoring him, the children dashed to the middle of the room.

General Peng stooped down and ruffled their hair. "Do you have some major military matters to discuss?" he asked.

The kids looked at one another, their merry black eyes liquid as drops of water rolling on a lotus leaf, and burst into gurgles of laughter. Then, as if they had rehearsed it, they embraced the general's legs and besieged him with requests. One wanted empty rifle cartridges. Another wanted "only a very, very small" pistol.

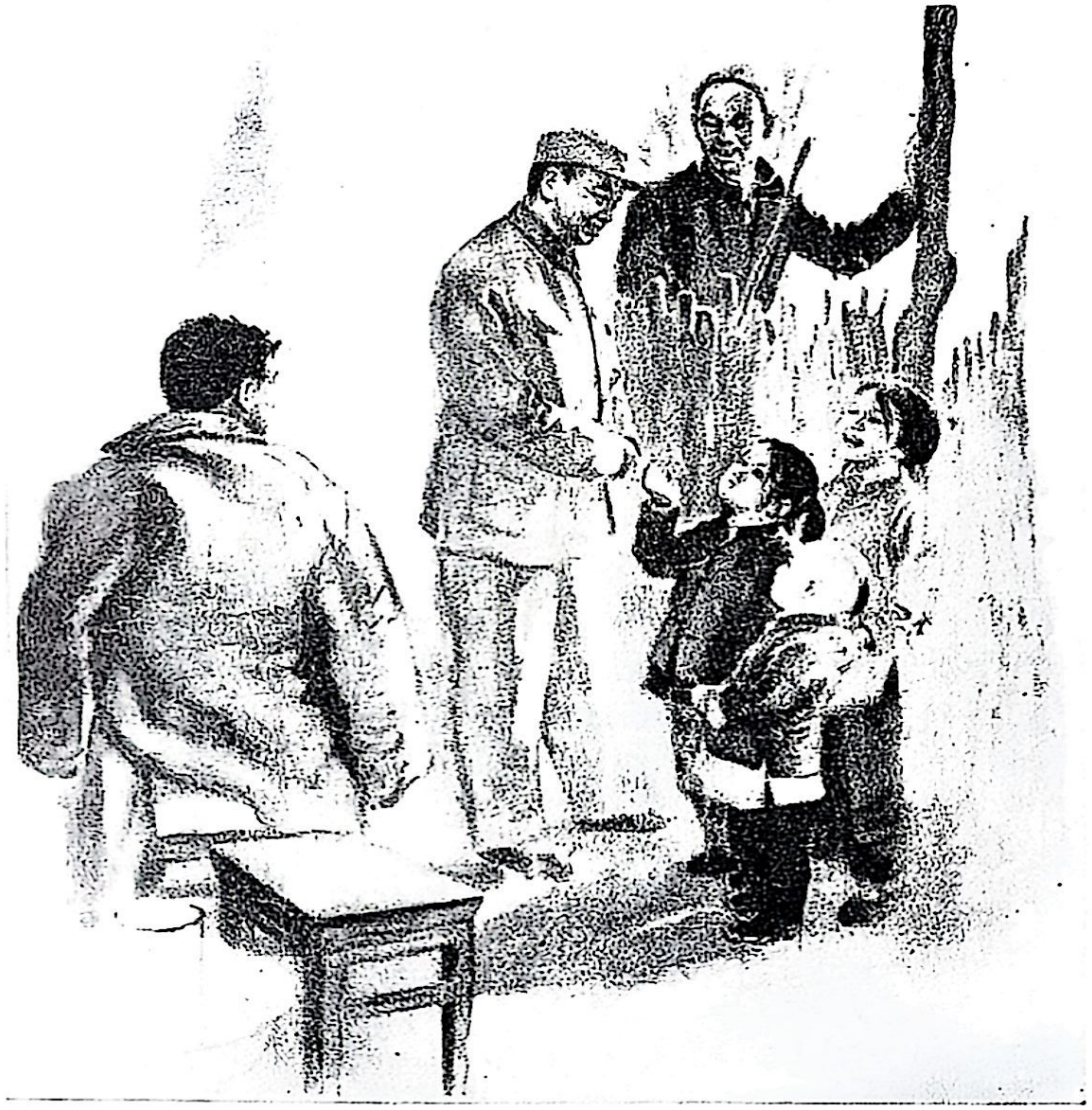
General Peng savored their animated chatter for several minutes, then escorted them to the door. "You'd better play outside," he said with a smile. As the children went skipping away, he called, "Not so fast. Be careful. That path is slippery." He watched them deliberately splashing through puddles, walking backwards to wave at him, and he laughed.

Returning to Chen, the general questioned him on how the men felt about the coming battle. Then, with hands clasped behind his back, he stood in the doorway squinting at the distant mist-enshrouded peaks. Finally, he turned and asked:

"Are you confident that we can take Panlongzhen?"

"I still don't entirely understand the plans of the high command," said the brigadier.

General Peng examined the map and again quietly calculated on his fingers. The enemy force being drawn towards Suide would take at least seven days to reach there, he explained. Why seven days? This was based on a consideration of north Shaanxi's mountain roads and weather, the weight each enemy soldier was carrying, the speed and special characteristics of the march. When we commence our attack on Panlongzhen, the general continued, the main enemy force, which then will be close to Suide, will have to turn around and come to the rescue. But before they do that, they are sure to ask for instructions from Hu Zongnan. The telegram they send him will certainly offer several possible plans of action. It will take time for him to consider these plans. More time will elapse before a telegram with Hu Zongnan's decision reaches the hands of the enemy in Suide. It will



take still more time for the enemy's main force to rush back to Panlongzhen.

"Thus we can see," said General Peng, "we have four days, at the very minimum, to complete our attack."

He covers every detail — and he's so clear, marvelled Chen.

Speaking slowly and quietly, General Peng continued with his analysis. The enemy was stationed in depth for several miles all around the outskirts of the town, he said. In addition to strong fortifications in the field, they also had over thirty major fortresses. The general estimated how many hours would be needed to win these fortresses. He talked about the numerical strength of the enemy, their weapons, morale, striking power, their advantages and weaknesses, and compared them with our own. He discussed which conditions were favourable to us, which were unfavourable.

The many pieces in the brigadier's mind now all fitted nicely together. He felt exceptionally optimistic about the coming attack, exceptionally confident.

General Peng concluded his remarks. Hands clasped behind his back, he asked, "What do you think?"

"I was worried about the time element at first. But according to the general's calculations, besides the time we'll need to prepare, we'll have another four days for the attack itself."

"Yes, at least four days. Four days and four nights."

"Then there's no question about it, so far as my outfit is concerned."

"You're sure, eh? What tactics do you propose to use to capture Jiyu Ridge? That's the key position in the entire assault."

Gazing at the map-covered wall, Chen recalled the impressions he had formed from the intelligence reports and studies made during the past few days. He pictured in his mind the terrain of Jiyu Ridge, the way the enemy was deployed on it, their fortifications, the placement of their fire power. And on the basis of these things, he made his calculations.

General Peng paced the floor softly, as if afraid to disturb Chen's train of thought.

The brigadier began to speak. He told of the terrain reconnaissance reports, his choice of fire power positions, the organization of assault units, where he planned to make his break-throughs.

The general stood motionless, his hands behind his back, concentrating on Chen's every word and syllable. Occasionally, his eyes went to the map, and he pondered as he listened. When Chen mentioned sapping and demolition, General Peng interrupted.

"What about sapping and demolition? Tell me in detail."

"We're very short of field pieces, and our shells are limited. Therefore, sapping and demolition will play a decisive role in attacking such a strongly fortified base. Every assault unit has dug ditches leading right up to the enemy's frontline trenches; their barbed-wire entanglements have all been cut open. Cliffs which are too sheer to be scaled we intend to blast at the base with demolition charges and form slopes to serve as mounting ramps."

General Peng moved forward a trifle, concentrating deeply. After a moment, he said, "Attacking this heavily fortified base, sapping and demolition will be extremely important."

He talked in detail about reconnaissance of terrain, fire power, the organization of assault detachments. War is a mortal struggle, he reminded Chen. For this reason the highest sense of responsibility was required of military and political officers of every rank. They could not permit themselves the least carelessness. Before the battle they had to plan correctly, prepare thoroughly — victory was the result of intensive preparation, rigorous inspection — and check their men's every cartridge, every shoelace.

"You must fight your way up to this position you're attacking. No matter what the difficulties, you must take it." General Peng pointed to Jiyu Ridge on the map. "It will require the utmost determination of your officers, the most stubborn will of your men." He tapped his forehead. "A man's brain can't be separated into compartments. He can't want victory in one half of his mind and be afraid of losses in the other. If that's the way he thinks, he becomes weak when he suffers losses, his determination wavers, his chances of victory are endangered."

Pausing, the general slowly paced the floor a few steps and then, like a patient, methodical old teacher, went on: "Wiping out tens of thousands of the enemy starts with eliminating one enemy sentry, one enemy squad. Carelessness about one sentry or one squad may influence the entire course of battle. The enemy can't frighten us, no matter how many soldiers and planes and big guns they have. But in actual battle even if you outnumber the enemy you mustn't underestimate them. You have to deal with them carefully." Making a slight downward movement with his hands, Peng concluded, "Even if you think you've killed the tiger, you'd still better hit him another few licks. Pride and underestimation of the enemy — those are the only things we have to fear."

Chen was struck by a sudden realization: Treating the North-west campaign as a whole, General Peng had nothing but contempt for the enemy. Yet when it came to taking a particular height, like Jiyu Ridge, he examined the problem with the greatest care, going into matters which a commander of a regiment, or even a battalion, ordinarily need not handle personally.

"Do you have any other difficulties?" asked the general.

"No," said Chen, "except that we're rather low on artillery shells. It doesn't matter. We'll think of something."

General Peng made no reply.

The brigadier was immediately sorry he had brought the question up. When had three rounds or five rounds, or ten rounds for that matter, ever won an engagement for him? Hadn't he always had to attack with his infantry after the shells were gone? There had been no point in his mentioning them.

On the road back to his brigade Chen reviewed mentally everything the general had said. It seemed to him he had heard those ideas many times before, yet this time, hearing them again, they sounded unusually fresh and rich in content.

The brigadier had been letting his horse run freely. Now, turning his head, Chen found that he had left his mounted escort-messenger far behind. He slowed his animal to a walk and, swaying to the gentle pace, returned to his thoughts.

... General Peng didn't reply when I said we were short of shells. Yes, I shouldn't have raised that question. But to tell the truth if we could find another four or five rounds somewhere for our mountain guns, they'd really be a treasure.

4

SHORTLY before dark the main force of the Northwest Field Army started preparing to take up battle positions. Some units assembled in the valleys, others started climbing the slopes. Mounted messengers raced through the gorges.

From the heights on all sides of Panlongzhen came the staccato chatter of enemy machine-guns.

After the PLA units were in position, the brigade command post was set up in a cave at the foot of a bluff.

Brigadier Chen was talking to a number of officers when the phone rang. He picked it up and heard the voice of the commander-in-chief of the column:

"You're all in position? Good. If we put everything we've got into this attack we're sure to win. I've good news for you. Field Army's issued you eight rounds of mountain gun shells."

"That's fine," said Chen delightedly. "Those shells are precious. General Peng certainly has a good memory. Yesterday he asked me whether I had any difficulties. All I said was a few rounds of artillery shells would come in handy. And now he's sending me eight. They'll be a big help."

"Maybe the day isn't so far off when we'll be able to dump tens of thousands of rounds on the enemy's head in one battle. But right now eight rounds is a lot to us. Tell your artillery men to make every shot count." The telephone earpiece crackled with a cheerful laugh.

"You don't have to worry about that," the brigadier replied. "Our gunners never miss. In fact they only wish they could make one shell do the work of ten."

The moon played in and out among the clouds, now shining on the curving line of the mountains, now being swallowed up again. It had just stopped raining and the air was especially pure. The sound of enemy shots rang clear and sharp. Our positions lay cloaked in darkness. Our troops huddled quietly beneath ledges, in trenches, in fox-holes, behind mountain-tops. A few men muffled coughs with their caps, some cleaned their rifle muzzles, others lightly polished machine-guns with their sleeves. Here and there a soldier sat with his cheek pressed against his rifle, as if whispering to it some last minute instructions.

About five in the morning, the tempo of enemy firing increased. Bullets whistled overhead. Red and green signal rockets rose above the KMT positions. Glaringly white flares hung like electric bulbs in the sky, brightly illuminating the mountain-tops.

On both sides there was tense activity. At any moment the hundreds of lines leading to our field telephones might resound with General Peng's brief, stern command: "Commence fire!" And with this order the North-west Field Army's first direct assault on a heavily fortified enemy base would begin.

The nine and a half brigades constituting the main force of the KMT warlord general Hu Zongnan were spread out almost ten miles in each direction as they marched north towards Suide through the never ending mountains of yellow earth. From a nearby height, commanders of the North-west Field Army watched them leaving the Panlongzhen area.

Exactly one week later, on the second of May, Hu's troops reached Suide.

There were more than a hundred thousand men in this KMT force. Not all could be squeezed into the city; some units camped in the surrounding hills. Dong Zhao, general of First Army, established his quarters in one of Suide's larger and more luxuriant compounds.

While staff officers hung maps on the wall, Dong Zhao washed his hands and face. Commanding general of the Twenty-ninth Army, Liu Kan, sat drafting a radiogram to Hu Zongnan. . . . *The red bandits are completely demoralized. We have retaken the strategically important city of Suide. . . .*

The telephone rang. Liu Kan answered it. For several minutes he listened without a word. Then he barked, "I know all that," and hung up.

Standing beside the table, he drummed it lightly with his fist. "General Dong," he said, "every unit reports many men sick or absent without leave. We have only one more day's rations. It's already May, but the troops are still wearing their heavy padded uniforms." He rubbed his chin reflectively.

"Master Hu has told us time and again in his radiograms — He is thinking of every soldier in our ranks," replied Dong. "The first batch of light clothing — 40,000 summer uniforms — has arrived at our military supply base, Panlongzhen. Food supplies have been sent there too. Although the road is bad, it would only take two or three days to bring rations from Panlongzhen here by motor transport. I believe we should stay in Suide until the food arrives, then march on to Mizhi. What is your opinion, brother?"

Liu Kan was about to answer when a pasty-faced officer handed him a radiogram. He walked with it to a map on the wall, turned to Dong Zhao and said:

"The Twenty-eighth Brigade and a part of the Twenty-second Army are moving down from Yulin. They're already on a line with Zheng Chuanbao. They'll take Mizhi quickly."

"It appears that we can join forces with them very soon. Our campaign is difficult and dangerous, but so far we have been successful." Dong Zhao wagged his head with satisfaction and happily paced the floor.

Liu Kan expertly measured the distance on the map with his fist. "They're not more than fifty miles from here, at most. If we don't halt in Suide but march on towards them, we can meet tomorrow. That will mean, first, that we control the entire length of the Xianyang-Yulin Highway — lines of communication are the pulse of modern warfare. Secondly, we will then be able to devote our entire strength to pushing the enemy to the bank of the Yellow River. They will have to fight with their backs against the water. Obviously, there can be only one result."

An officer carrying a leather briefcase placed another radiogram on the table before Dong Zhao.

Reading it, Dong Zhao suddenly turned pale and clutched the edge of the table with one hand. The other hand hung paralyzed at his side. Then he snatched up the message again and raced through it quickly, three times, as if he couldn't see clearly.

"Is it possible?" he muttered. "I can't believe it!"

Liu Kan had observed his distress, but continued walking slowly up and down the room in silence. His manner seemed to say — no blow was worth getting excited about, no change could take place which he had not already anticipated. A proud, contemptuous smile twisted the corners of his lips. He strolled over to Dong Zhao and coldly took the radiogram from his hands. He perused it briefly, then thought for several minutes.

"The Communist army has surrounded Panlongzhen?" he scoffed. "A fine tale to frighten fools. The Reds' trick of yelling east and attacking west deceives no one but armchair generals. I simply cannot understand some of the men close to Master Hu — General Sheng Wen, for instance."

Placing the message on the table, Liu Kan put a tea cup on top of it. "First of all, when we left Panlongzhen we were hot on the heels of the enemy's main force. Surely they didn't suddenly fly back to Panlongzhen from Suide? In the second place, according to our aerial reconnaissance, the enemy is east of Suide and Mizhi counties near the Yellow River where they're assembling a large fleet of boats, obviously preparing to cross. Thirdly, we've been tailed by a Communist detachment ever since we left Panlongzhen. At first we thought they might be a guerilla unit trying to bluff us with a big show, but investigation has revealed that they are the enemy's 359th Brigade. There is no question whatsoever — they are attempting to hold us back, to prevent us from concentrating our entire strength in a drive against their main force east of Suide. Fourthly, since ahead of us is the enemy's main force, fleeing in disorder, and right behind us is their 359th Brigade, what troops are the Communists using to take Panlongzhen? It's utter nonsense. We're not exactly ignorant of the forces they have at their disposal. Fifthly, the enemy knows that with our armies on this long march, food supplies are important to us. And so, with a small detachment, they feign an attack on our supply base, Panlongzhen, hoping to panic us. But the only ones they panic are people like Sheng Wen. I'm positive this radiogram was sent by him. How Master Hu could have appointed that ignoramus chief of the general staff is beyond me. He's going to be the death of our glorious cause."

Liu Kan's arrogant eyes openly revealed his dissatisfaction with Dong Zhao, and his contempt.

Dong Zhao blinked. "We must first ask instructions from Master Hu, and make a careful study of the enemy's situation. I think for the time being we ought to stay right here in Suide. Of course, we have to ask Master Hu first. In other words . . . in other words, caution is better than rashness. What do you think?"

"Caution and stopping completely are two different things. In my humble opinion, we should immediately make another aerial reconnaissance of enemy activity near the Yellow River east of Suide. If we confirm that the enemy's main force is there, that will explode any trick they are attempting. Secondly, I propose that you, General Dong, remain with your forces in the city. I will take my Twenty-ninth Army on a thorough mop-up of Suide's outskirts. This will help us estimate the enemy's real strength and, at the same time, perhaps uncover some grain."

Without waiting for Dong's reply, Liu Kan turned and left. He went back to his army, encamped outside the city.

On May the third, in the outskirts of Suide, several tens of thousands of Hu Zongnan's troops crawled from hill to hill like a swarm of locusts.

In his city quarters, Dong Zhao alternately sat a while, slept a while, and stood before the map. He did this from dusk of the second to dawn of the third, and again from dawn of the third until the sun rose on May the fourth. He refused to see anyone except those most intimate with him. All other officers were stopped by his aide at the door. There was something bad in the wind, but what? Only the few First Army division commanders knew the details. But all they could do was pace around the table. The evening of the day before, Dong Zhao, in his own name, had sent an urgent message to Hu Zongnan asking where they, the main force, should go next. There was no reply as yet, and Dong Zhao was on pins and needles.

Although there was no word from Hu Zongnan, dispatches from his headquarters continued to come in regularly. Their general tenor was:

> *Communist troops attacking Panlongzhen from all sides. Intense artillery fire. Our defending units have been forced to give up five important positions.*
>
> *The Communist army has smashed a large part of Panlongzhen's major positions. Every one of our officers and men died like a martyr for his country.*
>
> *The Communists are fiercely attacking Jiyu Ridge, the height commanding the city. . . . General headquarters has ordered our defending general, Li Kungang, and his surviving forces . . . not to break through the encirclement, but to continue fighting.*
>
> *. . . The air forces under your command are to return at once to support Panlongzhen. Urgent, don't delay. . . .*

On the morning of May the fourth, telegrams from Hu Zongnan began to arrive, one after another, all urging Dong Zhao and Liu Kan to rush back immediately to the aid of Panlongzhen. They pressed with the insistence of a death warrant.

"Madness, sheer madness. We couldn't reach there in time even with an airlift." Dong Zhao sat slumped on a bench. The latest message slipped from his nerveless fingers and fluttered to the floor.

Four or five telephones were arrayed on the table beside him. They rang long and incessantly before Dong Zhao seemed to suddenly become aware of their sound. Heavily, he reached out a hand and picked up one of the receivers.

"General," said a voice, "our unit . . . food supplies. . . ."

Dong Zhao hung up, and raised another receiver.

"General, we have no more rations."

Every telephone report said the same thing in different words — There was no grain left. They couldn't have told him earlier, or later — no, they had to pick now, the most critical moment, to add to his troubles. Why didn't they drop dead!

Dong Zhao rapped on the table. A staff officer, responding to this summons, approached him timidly.

"I'll take no more phone calls. For the next two hours, I'm not in to anyone."

The afternoon of the fourth, Dong Zhao opened his radio transmitter. He heard the voice of Li Kungang, commander of the 167th Brigade besieged in Panlongzhen. Li was yelling at the KMT headquarters command in Yanan, demanding air support, demanding reinforcements.

Dong Zhao turned on his portable commercial radio receiver. Ear-splitting static was followed by a pompous military march. Then came the melting tones of a woman's voice:

"In the bandit extermination campaign in north Shaanxi, our officers and men are fighting with magnificent courage. The Communist army has been pulverized. Its scattered remnants are fleeing towards the Yellow River to cross over into Shanxi. . . ."

The general sighed. "Damned fools."

He turned around. The brigade and division officers he had summoned for a meeting had all arrived. Liu Kan, who had been leading his army in a "mop-up" of the city's outskirts, came hurrying into the room. Dong Zhao switched off his radio.

Officers were examining the pinned-up maps; some sat motionless, studying their own noses; others gazed at the wall. No one spoke. No one looked at anyone else. There was little movement. The atmosphere was charged. It felt as if striking one match could blow the whole room sky high.

Dong Zhao tossed a sheaf of telegrams on the conference table. "It's only a question of time before Panlongzhen falls into the hands of the Communists," he said.

"How long would you estimate, general?" someone asked.

"If not tonight, then tomorrow morning."

"Reinforce them."

"Reinforce them?" queried a brigadier standing beside the map. "We're more than a hundred miles away."

Liu Kan rapped the table. "Li Kungang is an experienced general. Master Hu thinks highly of him. Perhaps he can turn the tide. Besides, Panlongzhen is heavily fortified and it's defended by seven or eight thousand men. With the Communists' present strength and equipment, they'd have a hard time taking it."

A general seated next to Liu Kan spoke. "Li Kungang has already proven his exceptional loyalty and valour. If anyone else were commanding, he would long since have been a prisoner of the Communists."

Dong Zhao paced the floor. Then, tiring, he produced a slip of paper. "General Liu and I have prepared an urgent telegram to Master Hu. It says that after careful consideration we have decided that headquarters' order for us to hasten to reinforce Panlongzhen is the only proper course." Dong Zhao shook his head. "Actually, instead of going to Panlongzhen, we'd be much better off if we returned to the Yanan area immediately."

"The quicker the better," interrupted a grave-faced division commander. "We'll all starve to death if we wait much longer."

"Our most pressing problem is that we're out of grain," said a short, heavy-set officer. "Will someone please tell me how we're going to march seven or eight days back to Yanan on empty stomachs? What are we going to eat — the north-west wind?"

"We'll never get anywhere talking this way. We can seize grain from the peasants along the march. Come what may, man can always find a way out."

"Besides," Dong Zhao added, "we can get rations by airdrop. Although they wouldn't be much, still. . . ."

An officer stood up and leaned both hands on the edge of the table, his arms trembling slightly. "We're just cutting off living flesh to patch a sore," he said. "We've pulled seven brigades out of south Shanxi to attack this wretched north Shaanxi. The result is the Communists have taken advantage of our weakened position in south Shanxi and are cutting in there like a knife slicing down a length of bamboo. If I may presume to speak frankly — we've thrown away the meat to gnaw on the bone. And the bone is sticking in our throat."

"I agree with our elder colleague completely," said a voice from the corner of the room. "To put it briefly — we have made a major blunder in strategy. Things are not going well at all on the country's various battlefields, but we've thrown several hundred thousand crack troops into an attack on north Shaanxi. What is the point of commencing such a campaign now? And another thing you gentlemen are here and can see for yourselves — this north Shaanxi is a veritable hell. The Communists have been in control here for years. The peasants are Red through and through. If we send an agent among them, he promptly disappears. Our only source of intelligence is aerial reconnaissance. But north Shaanxi is all mountains, and this puts a serious crimp in our aerial activities. Without eyes or ears, we see nothing and hear nothing. We don't know the local situation, we're not familiar with the terrain. . . . It's heart-breaking, gentlemen, heart-breaking!" The speaker waved his arm with an oratorical flourish. "You gentlemen are well versed in books of military lore. In all the histories of Chinese or foreign wars, has there ever been a campaign as stupid and clumsy as the one we are waging today?"

Sputtering angrily, a fat officer pounded his fist on the table. "The wrong time, the wrong place, the wrong campaign," he yelled. "The most unforgivable sins in military tactics — we've committed them all."

The smoky room was filled with the babble of conversation, deep sighs, wild gesticulation.

Dong Zhao made placating motions with both hands and begged for order. "Calm yourselves, gentlemen, calm yourselves. We have to face the situation as it is. Quiet, gentlemen, please."

Another officer rose to his feet. "It's Sheng Wen who's made a mess of everything. He sits in Yanan scribbling red and blue lines on a map while we have to scurry all over these damn mountains. He ought to come out here and get a taste of it. And what is that intelligence department he runs supposed to be doing? A pack of bootlickers and blowhards."

"You shouldn't blame the chief of general staff, brother. It seems to me that it's Master Hu . . . ah, that is . . . it's we ourselves who are useless."

His face dark, the proud, icy Liu Kan stood up and rapped the table. "No, it's not because we are useless, it's because the Communists are too slippery. They don't have the courage to come out and fight, they don't dare risk a decisive battle. Their only resource is a lot of tricks. That doesn't prove anything."

"I'm not so sure," an officer near the door said in a low voice. "It may be that we can't bite into them. Otherwise why can't we force them to stand and fight to a finish?"

Gazing at a map on the wall, another officer murmured, "Can't bite into them? No . . . the trouble is some of our superiors make military plans on the spur of the moment—"

Liu Kan cut him short with a wave of the hand. "I must remind you gentlemen not to wander too far from the point," he said authoritatively. "I request that you all view our present situation correctly. One thing you must make clear to the officers and men under your command — the enemy definitely cannot put us in a hopeless position."

"What is the way out, then?" asked an officer.

A confidential aide entered and said to Liu Kan softly, "Panlongzhen is demanding reinforcements from Yanan. They say unless they get help they're going to try to break out. It looks as if. . . ." Although the aide spoke quietly, the whole room heard him.

The generals looked at one another. Every word of the "unfortunate" news stung their hearts.

"Li Kungang is a splendid fellow," someone said in a low voice. "If he says he can't hold out, then it's really all up."

At that moment an officer, like the Soul-Hooking Ghoul, entered with another radiogram.

It was from the commander of the KMT troops moving south from Yulin. He wanted to know why the main force of the "National Army" was not marching towards Mizhi to meet him.

"We're not even sure whether we can take care of ourselves without having to worry about him," said a division general. "It's settled, then — we'll withdraw towards Yanan. Whether we make it or not, anything will be a thousand times better than hanging around here."

Everyone rose and prepared to leave. Then still another telegram arrived:

> *Panlongzhen has fallen into the hands of the Communist army. Our bold and loyal officers and men paid the supreme sacrifice for the Kuomintang and the nation. . . .*

The news was not unexpected, but when it came at last,

so final and official, it sent a chill through the assembled officers. Those seated seemed nailed to their chairs. The men standing appeared stricken with paralysis. Liu Kan's face was the colour of slate.

A brigadier stood looking at the map. "We're getting in deeper and deeper," he muttered. "Because the Communist army in Shanxi had taken Fengling Ford and was threatening Xian, we thought we'd drive their main force in Shaanxi back across the Yellow River and then concentrate all our strength in a drive to relieve our armies in south-west Shanxi. But now our main force is stalled here, hundreds of miles from Xian. We've lost Panlongzhen and endangered our entire army, and the Communist troops in Shanxi are in a position to cross the Yellow River and drive west on Xian. . . . If Peng Dehuai decides to use this opportunity to retake Yanan . . . then we're finished, my dear brothers."

Liu Kan, his chest thrust forward aggressively, his eyes bloodshot, drummed his fist on the table.

"Lies," he raged shrilly. "It's not nearly as serious as that."

5

THE temporary regiment to which Dayong and his men were attached, after having lured the main enemy force as far north as Suide, turned and travelled quickly to rejoin the brigade. Dawn several days later found the PLA men entering a large valley. They had marched all through the previous night.

With large steady strides, Dayong moved up to the head of his battalion. From time to time he shouted towards the rear, "Faster." The assistant political instructor of Sixth Company, Wei Gang, sent a messenger up to Dayong to tell him:

"You'd better slow down a little. The prisoners can't keep up."

Dayong looked at the long line snaking behind him. The prisoners were marching in the middle of the column — well over two hundred of them. He was very pleased. The expedition had taken only two weeks and had been a complete success.

The men breathed deeply of the moist morning air. It seemed to wash away the fatigue of the long night's march.

Climbing above the horizon, the sun coated the mountains with a layer of pink. There were thin wisps of clouds in the sky, and mist rose from the valley. Crystal drops of dew glittered on the green grass and red flowers by the roadside. Cuckoos warbled in the trees.

Peasant herdsmen, driving cattle and sheep, could be seen as tiny shadowy figures on the high mountain-tops, and the tinkle of the animals' bells drifted down. As if in welcome of the PLA men, one of the peasants started a typical north Shaanxi "conversation" ditty:

The red flag flutters in the sky,
Here come our soldier brothers.

A woman's voice took up the refrain:

Clear sky, azure sky, sky of blue,
We love them like no others.

Here, one of the PLA soldiers, a north Shaanxi man himself, burst into song:

Dear as any relative, you and me,
Aren't we all one family?

Outside of a village, up ahead, Dayong saw an old man. As they drew near, Dayong decided to ask him to act as guide. The old man stood with his hands behind his back gazing at the devastation the enemy had wrought. Doors and windows had been burned out, trees cut down, furniture smashed; the street was littered with broken spinning wheels, the joint of a cow, chicken feathers, bloodstains. . . . His face silently reflecting his fierce anger, the old man looked ready to burst.

"We'd like to ask you to be our guide, uncle," said Dayong. "May we?"

The old man glanced at him coldly. "Why not? There's nothing wrong with my legs."

"Let's go then. I know you're glad to help your own army, uncle."

One of the old man's arms dangled awkwardly at his side, and he walked with a slight limp, but his carriage was firm and erect. "What good are your eyes?" he said peevishly. "Can't even recognize one of our own people when you see him?"

Dayong turned his head to hide a grin.

He knew that our main force had gone to the Zhenwu Caves area to rest after taking Panlongzhen, and so he asked the old man:

"How far is it from here to Zhenwu Caves?"

"About fifteen miles. But there's no charge for walking in north Shaanxi, so just keep going."

The old man's beard and the hair at his temples were white. He had a large square face with high cheekbones. Bushy brows almost completely obscured his deep-set eyes. In spite of his crippled arm, he appeared healthy and vigorous.

At every burnt-out village along the line of march, the old man stopped and looked, silent, grim. When he spoke to Dayong, he said what he wanted to say, with no regard to whether Dayong was listening or not.

By his respectful manner, Dayong gradually won the liking of the crusty old man. He began to speak more freely.

"Son," he said, "Chairman Mao has really got us peasants in his heart. People have been urging him to cross the Yellow River, but he won't go. If you ask me, I think he ought to get over to the east side where it's safe. With all this fighting and shooting going on — what if something happened to him? Yet at other times I think — if Chairman Mao really crossed the river, how empty our hearts would feel. Son, I don't know what to think."

"It's the same with us soldiers, uncle. We know Chairman Mao is directing the war of liberation all over the country, yet here he is joining our marches, our battles, getting soaked in the rain — we get awfully worried about him. But don't you fret, uncle. If Chairman Mao is staying in north Shaanxi, there must be a good reason for it. When our Chairman decides on a plan, you can be sure it's right."

"You've got something there, son. I want to ask you a question. — But don't you laugh at me." He gave Dayong a look that said — I'm asking because I trust you.

"Everybody says," the old man began, "that when Chiang Kai-shek and Hu Zongnan hold their meetings in Xian, Chairman Mao, standing on our north Shaanxi mountains, can see them and hear what they're talking about. The enemy got wind of this, and now, when they have meetings, they don't dare talk to each other — they only write on pieces of paper. But our Chairman Mao still only has to think a minute, and he figures out what's going on in their minds."

Dayong smiled. "Lots of peasants tell that story. But there's nothing to it, uncle. Of course our Chairman Mao can look right into the enemy's bones, but not by magic. According to you, Chairman Mao is a god up in the heavens."

The old man stared at Dayong with frosty disapproval. Enunciating each word deliberately and emphatically, he retorted, "There's a war going on, so everything's become a secret. You treat me like an outsider. Won't tell me the truth. But I know Chairman Mao is no ordinary mortal. When the Whites took Yanan, he made three circles — one around Qinghua Gorge, one around the Yangma River, and still one around Panlongzhen. People from our village saw him do it with their own eyes. We didn't know what he meant then, but after the fighting started we found out — in every one of those circles the enemy met disaster. I hear Chairman Mao's drawn a lot more circles. Is that true?"

Obviously the old man had not the slightest doubt that it was true. He was not seeking confirmation from Dayong, only additional information.

Dayong wanted to explain — our army wins victories because of the kind of thinking on which its military strategy is based. But then he thought — why go into all that? This wasn't the first time he had heard such tales from the peasants, nor was it the tenth. What was the point of attacking this sort of simple, honest faith at a time like this? The people of north Shaanxi had always been of great help to him and his men in battle. Dayong felt a surge of respect and affection for the old man.

"Uncle," he said, "the folks in north Shaanxi go through fire and water for their army. Did you hear about old Li Zhende? That old man was a real hero. Our army's political department printed a pamphlet about him and gave it out to all the men."

"What he did wasn't much. We fought the revolution for years under Comrade Liu Zhidan. And ever since 1935 the Communist Party and Chairman Mao have been teaching us — and that's more than ten years. We've all learned plenty. So if a peasant does some trifling bit to help our army, why, he's only doing his duty."

"You're looking at it too simply, uncle. If it weren't for the self-sacrificing spirit of people like old Li, our army could not have won the battle of Qinghua Gorge."

The old guide appeared very moved. Glancing at Dayong, he said, "We've finished off three KMT brigades in a row in the last forty-five days. The enemy won't last long at this rate."

It seemed to Dayong that the old man was trying to change the subject. "You're right about that," he replied. "But I think you've got the wrong attitude about that heroic old peasant, Li Zhende. Did you ever meet him?"

"Well . . . that is . . . ah, comrade — Li Zhende can't die. He can't bear to leave the new world our Communist Party is building. If heaven is willing, he'd like to live to a hundred and eighty."

What was the old man driving at? "Uncle," Dayong asked quickly, "are you saying that old Li is still alive?"

The old guide made no reply. He seemed to have lost interest in the conversation.

But Dayong could see there was something peculiar in the old man's manner, and his suspicions mounted. "Is he really alive?" Dayong pressed excitedly. "Where is he? Tell me."

"Well . . . as a matter of fact . . ." the old man said. Then evidently realizing there was no necessity for him to mumble, he said firmly, "I am Li Zhende."

Dayong was delighted, stirred, startled — but not entirely convinced. He grasped the old man by the hand and looked him over from head to foot.

"Uncle, you're really and truly . . . ?" But everyone says you were killed jumping off that cliff."

Word spread down the column like the wind — The old hero Li Zhende is in our ranks! Cheers and cries of admiration swelled in waves that swept the line of march.

Dayong finally got the story from the old man: The day of the battle at Qinghua Gorge, old Li, rather than help the enemy, jumped from the cliff with his grandson in his arms. The little boy was killed, but old Li lived and late that night was rescued by the guerillas. After a few days of semi-consciousness, he recovered and found himself lying on a bed in a field army hospital.

The old man said his eldest son, Li Yushan, used to be a district chief, but was now leading a guerilla unit. It was this son's child, Shuanniu, who had been killed. Old Li's second son — still known by his baby name, "Manman" — had applied and been accepted in the regular army and was said to be receiving training in a newly organized regiment. But the old man hadn't had any news from him for some time.

"Say! I know Li Yushan, uncle," cried Dayong. "I saw him only a couple of days ago. He's a very good comrade. Always helping us with grain shipments and organizing stretcher bearers."

"When fighting starts, families get scattered," said old Li. "Parents and children lose track of each other. You say you met Yushan a few days ago. I haven't seen a shadow of him for more than a month. Ai! I've got to carry the whole family on my shoulders now, old and young. Keeps me so busy I've no time to come out and do a little work for the public."

"Where is your family living now?" Dayong asked him.

Old Li shook his head sorrowfully. "You can't really talk about a family. Everyone who can carry a gun has joined the guerillas. My old lady's taken two grandchildren to a relative's, west of the Yangma River area. But the enemy's still acting up around that area. It's not safe. I figure in a couple of days I'll send the old woman and the kids up north to stay with my eldest married daughter. Now that the enemy's come down here, I don't think they'll go north again."

"Where does your daughter live?"

"In Jiulishan, north of Qingjian."

"You'll be right to send the family up there. This section is too dangerous."

6

AFTER rejoining our main force and making a report to the regimental C.O. on the success of the mission to lure the enemy up to Suide, Dayong headed for the village where the First Battalion was quartered. On the way, he saw long lines of soldiers emerging from the regiment's supply depot. They were carrying new American-made weapons. Some had drawn belts of ammunition. Others bore sacks of flour. The men sang lustily:

Quick, be quick, trade in your gun,
For your old get a nice new one,
Chiang Kai-shek, our supply chief, hey,
Sends us weapons from the U.S.A.!

Dayong returned to First Company.

The men were in high spirits over the victory they had won. They forgot completely the fatigue of fighting a whole day and a whole night. Animated discussions were going on about the battle.

"How many prisoners did your squad capture?"

"Ninety-six. And we got four heavy machine-guns besides. What about you?"

"Our squad only took twenty-nine prisoners. But we captured two mountain guns."

"American?"

"Of course."

"You see? I always said Truman wasn't a bad guy. You fellows never agree with me."

"He must be your relative or something, you like him so much."

"I look at it this way: If Truman didn't have Chiang Kai-shek send us all these artillery pieces and machine-guns we wouldn't be doing half so well. You must admit using this stuff is a lot better than fighting with your bare fists."

The men leaped to their feet when Dayong entered. He returned their salute and they all crowded round him, everyone talking at once, telling him of the company's exploits in the battle of Panlongzhen.

"It would have done your heart good, commander," said Jiangguo. "The controlling height over Panlongzhen — Jiyu Ridge — our company was the first to get there. It was no push-over either. We had to attack three times before we took it. When we smashed into the town — there was a half-moon shining overhead — political instructor Chengde led our company against the enemy's brigade headquarters. Tiger Wang nabbed their brigadier-general with his own hands."

"Li Kungang?"

"That's the guy. And he grabbed a lot of other big shots too."

A few of the men pushed Tiger forward. "He's been hiding in the back, commander, afraid to show his face. He was the first one on Jiyu Ridge, commander. Our brigadier says he's going to decorate him."

Tiger Wang stood before Dayong, his face crimson. He didn't seem to know what to do with his hands and feet.

Dayong gripped him affectionately by the shoulders. "You seem to keep your 'heroism' in your kit bag most of the time, Tiger. You only take it out when we fight."

"That's not the only thing he keeps in his kit bag, commander," said Jiangguo. "He's got his rations, his cloth shoes and his tobacco in there too. No matter what's going on, he always packs them in real neat and tight, the thick hick. Typical peasant mentality."

"Peasant mentality, nothing," drawled Tiger. "That's old army veteran's experience. A man loses his stuff if he doesn't take care of it."

A telephone call came from Brigadier Chen. Dayong was to report to brigade headquarters at once.

With a shout of "Report!" Dayong entered the cave in which the brigadier was quartered.

In shirt-sleeves rolled up above the elbows, Chen was busily repairing his radio. The table and benches were strewn with parts. Chen's beloved camera was also on the table. For years he had been carrying it with him wherever he went. The brigadier really enjoys playing with this stuff, thought Dayong. He was very familiar with Chen's hobbies.

Chen cheerfully began gathering his things together.

"Young Old Revolutionary," he said, "I know you don't like these toys. You've been with me a long time, but, after all, you're still you and I'm still me."

Dayong was equally familiar with the brigadier's happy disposition, his frank open manner.

Chen washed his hands, then looked Dayong over carefully. "You're thinner," he said. "You had a hard time of it."

"It would be fairer to say — the enemy had a hard time of it."

"You men led the enemy up to Suide from Panlongzhen, then escorted them all the way back — really most considerate

and thoughtful. Well, tell me, how did you find the enemy's morale? A little leaky around the spout?"

"More than that — pretty nearly gone altogether." Dayong walked to the door of the cave. He noticed a bit of doggerel someone had pinned up outside:

Wild man Hu Zongnan rages in a rut,
But the Xianyang-Yulin Highway still remains cut,
He had to drop Panlongzhen and Suide City,
A wild goose chase lost them both — what a pity!
Six thousand men and officers march in prisoners' parades,
We made silly monkeys of Hu's nine and a half brigades.

"Not bad, eh?" Chen asked with a grin. "That young brigade headquarters' messenger we call 'The Flea' copied it out of the newspaper. Now let's get down to business." He walked over to the map hanging on the wall.

"The day after we took Panlongzhen," said Dayong pointing at the map, "that is, on the fifth, Hu's nine and a half brigades turned around at Suide and scuttled back towards Yanan. Yesterday, with empty bellies, they finally reached Panlongzhen."

"And they got there just in time for a memorial service." Chen moved his finger from Panlongzhen — thirty miles north-east of Yanan, to Zhenwu Caves — thirty miles north-west of Yanan. "Our Field Army is now over here. The enemy is back at Panlongzhen, but we've cleaned out their supplies. We're eating their flour and having a quiet nap. We've had more than a week's rest already."

The brigadier scratched the back of his head and slowly paced the floor. "It's really comic when you come to think of it. A couple of hundred thousand enemy troops come charging in, acting very tough. There are only twenty thousand of us, but we just take our time and hit them again and again until they're running around in circles. Then we skip to the side and relax. You must admit that's pretty cute."

Dayong grinned. "I suppose Chiang Kai-shek and Hu Zongnan must be feeling kind of low these past few days?"

"I haven't been interested enough to analyse their moods. But if you are, you can make a special study of them." Chen laughed. He told Dayong to see to it that the men who had been on the expedition to the north got a good rest.

"Brigadier," said Dayong, "do you know about that old man, Li Zhende?"

"Yes, he died like a hero."

"He's not dead, he's alive and kicking. He's in our regiment's political department right now." Dayong told Chen the whole story of how old Li jumped from the cliff, how he was saved by the guerillas, how he happened to come to Zhenwu Caves with the returning PLA men.

"That's wonderful," cried Chen. "Orderly! Orderly! Lay out the guest dishes." He thought a moment, then said to Dayong, "I want to have a talk with the old man first. After that, I'd like to ask him to visit each regiment and address the men. There's nothing more educational than letting them hear about the heroic deeds of our people. Right?"

"Right, brigadier."

7

AS soon as the PLA men were able to relax, the gab session began. Everyone insisted on telling his experience in the battle of Panlongzhen — how worried he had been when things were going badly, how happy he had felt over final

victory. Everyone was in high spirits. The only exception was Ning Jinshan of First Company. His brows knitted, he looked disgusted with life. But whenever Chengde, the political instructor, questioned him, he said, "No, nothing's bothering me. My stomach's upset and I don't feel so good, that's all."

That night at dinner, Jinshan didn't eat anything, and again the political instructor came to see him. Wang Chengde talked to him for a while and said he would send for a doctor.

Jinshan knew there was nothing wrong with him physically. It was an idea that was oppressing him. Sometimes it stood out clearly in his mind, sometimes it lurked so hidden that he himself was unaware of it. But for the past few days it had never left him.

He lay on his pallet, gazing at the ceiling. He felt so irritated! Ten thousand soldiers and horses were milling in his brain. Exhaustion, depression, fear bound his heart tighter than a million cords. He wanted to throw them off, but he had neither the spirit nor the energy.

Today, that idea which he dared not speak aloud was clearer and sharper than ever — I've got to get away from the army! . . . Voicing the thought at last, he seemed to feel icy water running along his spine; his heart, too, froze into immobility. Like a man who comes to three forks in the road in the middle of the night, he was anxious, tired, but unable to make up his mind.

He thought of the political instructor, the comrades, how good they all were to him. They had saved his life . . . they wanted to help him along the right path. They treated him like a brother. Once when he was sick, the political instructor and several of the comrades had sat up with him all night, feeding him with care as gently as any mother. And it was true — the people were all for the PLA, the enemy couldn't compare with them. The revolution was good, the revolution had hope. Jinshan felt an urge to live a meaningful, though difficult, life. But then he thought of the war of movement they were waging, its endless exhausting marches . . . its dangers. How could he stick it out? He seemed enveloped by an endless darkness, a crushing weight grew heavier in his chest. He suddenly felt terrified, worn-out. His head was spinning and burned like fire. His mind was a confused jumble. "Am I really sick?" he wondered. He burrowed his head inside the quilt and wept.

A bright moon shone on the mountains and valleys. Along the river cool comfortable breezes blew.

Dayong and instructor Chengde, returning from a meeting at battalion headquarters, unbuttoned their shirts to enjoy the cool air. As they walked side by side in the moonlight, they could hear the men singing in the distance.

Little Cheng, the company messenger-orderly, usually had hot water waiting for Dayong whenever the company commander came back to his quarters, and the boy would chatter affectionately about all manner of things. Today, however, Dayong found him standing off in a corner, sulking.

Dayong said nothing, but only hung his pistol belt on the wall, then sat down on the edge of the brick oven-bed and began unwinding his puttees.

"What's eating you, little devil?" Chengde asked the youngster. "Your lips are pouted out so far I could hitch an ox to them."

"Jinshan has deserted!"

Dayong didn't believe it at first, and he questioned Little Cheng further. Then, the more he thought about it, the angrier he became and he slammed his hand on the table.

"Spineless! Spineless! He wants to run away from the struggle. Doesn't he know Chiang Kai-shek won't let him?"

Chengde rested one foot on a bench, and leaned his elbow on the raised knee, the hand of his crooked arm supporting his chin. The political instructor pondered, his eyes on the flickering flame of the lamp. When he spoke it was as if to himself:

"The Party has given us such a powerful ideological weapon, but we —" He kicked over the bench and went out.

Agitated, Chengde paced the courtyard. This wasn't just a matter of one man deserting — it was a test of the effectiveness of the political work in the company.

In the courtyard, the men of the company were discussing the question in excited tones. Everyone was angry and upset.

"Last night, the regimental C.O. praised us as one of the four model companies in the whole regiment," Jiangguo was saying. "Well, that title of 'model' has gone on a long vacation, this time. A deserter — of all the disgraces!"

Only after nearly everyone had finished speaking, did Tiger Wang venture a remark. "There's no use blaming this or blaming that," he drawled. "It's our own fault for not helping him understand."

"But the political instructor talked to him lots of times," protested Quanyou. "He didn't seem to be hiding anything. Yet he took off. What could we do — crawl into his brain? That would have suffocated us and given him a headache, but it still wouldn't have solved his problem."

"You can't turn iron into steel just by wishing for it," retorted Changsheng. "You're as much to blame as the rest of us for Jinshan deserting."

Quanyou's face turned red and the cords in his neck bulged. "If he won't fight for the revolution, why is it my fault?"

"You're too wrapped up in yourself, Quanyou," said Jiangguo. "A man criticizes you a little and you rush to counter-attack. Do you think you're better than everyone else?"

His eyes burning angrily, Quanyou stamped his foot. "You're all hopping on my neck," he shouted. "I'm not the one who deserted."

"Pipe down, Quanyou," said Tiger Wang. "Any passing breeze hits you and you start yelling — storm."

Political instructor Chengde came along just then, and the men fell silent. "What are you quarrelling about?" he demanded fretfully. "We slip up in our work, and try and shift the blame to others, is that it?"

The men stood at attention, their chests arched. No one said a word.

For a long time the political instructor stared at the mountains opposite Zhenwu Caves. Then he turned to Tiger Wang, who was responsible for organizational work in the Communist Party branch of First Company.

"We're calling a meeting immediately of the Party branch committee to discuss the desertion of Ning Jinshan. Notify all committee members to meet in company headquarters. On the double."

Late at night, it turned cold. The moon hanging in the western sky shone clear and frigid.

"North, south and west all are enemy-controlled territory. If I ran for days, I couldn't get through them. East, on the other side of the Yellow River, is a liberated area," Jinshan said to himself. He hurried east, east, climbing mountains, splashing across fords. He tripped over tree roots, he lost his hat, his trousers were ripped, he lacerated his palms, his clothes clung icily to his body. Bleary-eyed, breathing hard,

he couldn't think straight. To the east, to the east, with the moonlight on his back, he rushed towards the east. Pangs of remorse tormented him, but when he thought that he was going to a place where there was peace and quiet, a place free from fear, he was sustained by a thread of hope.

As he rounded a mountain, the sky took on the inky blackness that indicated dawn was near. He yearned for daylight, yet he feared it too.

Jinshan covered another two or three miles, and the sky lightened. He climbed to a mountain-top and furtively looked around. In the valley, three enemy soldiers were watering horses at a stream. Welcoming the cold morning air, the horses raised their heads and whinnied, the sound carrying very clear and sharp and, to Jinshan, somehow very frightening.

"Enemy soldiers," he muttered. "I must have run into one of their guards detachments." His military experience helped him now. He took advantage of terrain and natural cover, and crawled towards the shelter of a bluff. Suddenly he spied some wheat stalks scattered on a path, and he inched along their trail till he came to a small cave filled with stored wheat straw. Like a drowning man clutching the rope thrown to him, Jinshan plunged headlong into the little cave.

"Oh!" cried a high-pitched voice in the middle of the straw. The sound was cut off abruptly, as if something had muffled it.

Kneeling in the pile of straw, Jinshan raised his hands in panic, his heart beating wildly. He stared at the straw, paralyzed.

The straw moved, and a grizzled head emerged, with bits of wheat stalk clinging to its hair. A pair of dim, cold eyes gazed at Jinshan.

He could see the figure clearly now. It was a thin, little old lady, kneeling stiffly in the straw. Waxen skin stretched tight over her cheekbones. The lips of her toothless mouth curved inward. She stared fixedly at Jinshan with terrorized red-rimmed eyes, as if he were some savage beast who might spring at her at any moment.

Jinshan sat down weakly. He gazed at her with lacklustre eyes. "Don't be afraid, old mama," he said. "I'm. . . ." He looked at his grey uniform. It was spattered with mud, and badly rent in several places.

The old lady sank down on the straw and, frightened and suspicious, examined this man who had dropped out of the sky. She looked at his uniform for a long time. Suddenly, she began to weep, "Oh, our army has come!" Her thin little body was shaking with sobs.

The small cave came to life. Two children popped out of straw and climbed on Jinshan's knees. The old lady took his hand and brought her face close to his.

"Dear one," she said, "are you really one of our army? Cannon fires fill the sky — what are you doing out here alone? . . . And you look so tired."

Jinshan cast his eyes down miserably. "I can't find my unit, old mama. I've fallen behind."

The old lady knelt beside him as if he were her own son, and gently brushed the dried mud from his head and clothing.

"Being separated from your unit is like leaving your ma and pa, isn't it? Ai, these times! What are we going to do? . . ." The old lady opened her bundle. Wrapped in some coarse clothing was a woodcut of Chairman Mao and a couple of wheat muffins. She took Chairman Mao's picture in both hands.

"Son," she said, "my old man got this picture in Yanan two years ago. We had it hanging in our home. But now we've got no home. I carry Chairman Mao's picture with me. When I think of the hard times we're having I feel low, and whenever I feel low I look at our Chairman Mao."

Jinshan gazed dully outside, his face now pale, now dark, now ashen.

"Bad people are saying that Chairman Mao has crossed the Yellow River," the old lady went on. "Can it be?"

"No, old mama, Chairman Mao hasn't crossed the river. Don't ask me, old mama." Jinshan threw himself down on the hay. "I feel so awful."

"No wonder. You must be starved." She gave Jinshan two wheat muffins. "Eat, son, eat. Fill your stomach and when it gets dark we'll think of what to do. Eat. Man is iron but food is steel. It will give you strength. How you've suffered! Your palms are covered with blood!"

The motherly concern and compassion, the children's affectionate, sympathetic glances, burned Jinshan's heart like fire. If only a bullet would suddenly fly in and pierce his brain — anything would be better than this!

He noticed the children's hungry eyes fixed on the wheat muffins, and he offered one of the muffins to the five-year-old. Looking inquisitively at the expression on his grandmother's face, the child stretched out his hand.

"If instead of your bowl you're watching the pot, greedy children's little eyes will rot," snapped the old lady, pulling the child towards her. Then, feeling that she had been too harsh, she hugged the child to her bosom. Tears rolled down her cheeks. "Little trouble-maker. He has no manners."

"Have they really eaten, old mama?"

"Just go ahead and eat. Don't worry about them. Oh heavens! What are we coming to? Those murdering Whites —

may they all die a terrible death! A few days ago they began searching the village for grain every day and didn't return to the town until dark. All day long we hid in the mountains. Only at night could we go back for a bit to eat and drink. Two days ago they moved into the village too, so now we can't even do that. We're Yanan Valley people, son. Our home is miles from here. This is our relative's village. We thought here we could get away from the trouble. But today there's no peace anywhere. My old man wants us to go further north, to our married daughter's in Jiulishan. But we're so old and the children are so small — travelling's hard for us. I don't know where my sons and their wives have gone, but until I see them again I won't be able to die in peace. Children are no blessing in times like these. The more you have, the more you suffer. Old Lord of the Heavens! How much longer must this fighting go on?" The old lady's eyes were filled with tears.

Jinshan was afraid she would see how distraught he was, so he tried to change the subject. "We'll have peace soon," he said. "You probably have many grandsons, old mama. Think how nice it will be in a few years when they grow up —"

"Don't say that," cried the old lady. "Our lovely family. When the fighting began the White army forced my old man and our eldest grandson, Shuanniu, to jump off a cliff. Shuanniu was killed!"

An icy chill ran through Jinshan's frame. He remembered the old man who had addressed the whole battalion two days before — Li Zhende.

"My old man's a straightforward sort. Everybody likes him. His arm is crippled now and his eyes are weak and he stumbles on the road at night, but he's gone off with my eldest son, Yushan, in the guerillas. They're making it hot for the enemy."

Jinshan's body seemed consumed with fire. He dropped to one knee, his body stiffly erect. Just as he opened his mouth to speak, the old lady shoved the two children into the straw and pushed Jinshan down. He was surprised that she could muster so much strength.

The sight of her face, drained completely of colour, made Jinshan break out in goose pimples.

"White army . . . Old Lord of the Heavens. . . ." Terrified, the old lady trembled like a leaf.

Jinshan heard voices outside. From force of habit, he reached for his rifle. But he clutched only a handful of straw. He cursed softly. What a stupid way to die! Hugging the ground, he held his breath. He could hear his heart pounding against his ribs.

The hearts of the old lady and the children virtually stopped from fear. It was so still in the cave, their ears seemed filled with all sorts of queer noises.

Footsteps approached and a voice said:

"It would be good if we could get hold of a peasant."

"Our detachment has had plenty of experience. We've worked out a sure way to find grain. You want to search those places that look like not even a ghost would go there. That's where you'll probably find grain and clothes — and maybe women, if you're lucky."

"Look, here is wheat straw. Let's follow it up the slope."

"Say, isn't that a little cave? I'll bet there's something in there. Let's go up."

The sun was in the west. Far off in the distance, sporadic firing could be heard.

8

JINSHAN, his hands tied behind his back, hung suspended from a rafter in a cow-shed. Blood dripped from his nose and mouth. A thousand knives seemed to be cutting into his flesh. Remorse steeped his heart in bubbling oil. From the nearby cave he could hear pitiful cries, curses, blows.

"Speak. Who is he? If you don't tell, we'll flay you alive!"

"He's my son! No matter what you do, he's still my son!"

"You're lying! If he's your son, what's he doing in that Communist army uniform?"

"Even if you kill me, he's still my son! He's the flesh of my flesh! The gods have mercy on me! . . ."

Jinshan pictured the frail little old lady. Any wind could blow her over. What have I done! he thought, anguished. He wept, and the tears coursing down his face were mixed with blood.

More blows, more curses, more heart-rending screams. . . .

In times of the cruelest suffering every second seems to crawl. The enemy continued torturing the old lady until dark.

Moonlight shone in through the picket gate of the cow-shed. A sentry with fixed bayonet patrolled outside. The blade flashed with a cold light. Death danced on its tip. Death lurked in the gloomy corners of the cow-shed. The atmosphere was motionless, stifling!

Jinshan's arms were numb. They felt ready to drop off. His throat was burning with thirst. He fainted several times. He decided to try his luck.

"Water," he groaned weakly.

"What are you hollering about?" growled the sentry. "Shut up!"

Jinshan recognized the man's Henan accent. "We're from the same province," he cried. "I can tell from your voice that you're a Henan man. I'm from there too. We're both neighbours, a long way from home."

The sentry made no response. He seemed to be listening for something. Jinshan supposed that the enemy soldiers were all asleep. He strained his eyes to look. He saw a figure come out of the shadow of the compound wall and steal up behind the sentry. A big sword flashed in the air, then slashed down and cleaved the sentry in two. The assailant picked up the enemy's rifle and slung it across his back. Slipping into the cow-shed, the man cut Jinshan's bonds.

"Run! To the west!"

Jinshan grasped his arm. "You've saved my life! Who are you?" He was afraid he was dreaming.

"I'm from the guerillas. The people of this village sent us word that a comrade had been caught by the enemy. I was sent to rescue you."

Another dark figure suddenly appeared in the cow-shed. "Go, quickly," it said in a tremulous voice. "The sentry is gone . . . he's gone. . . ."

Startled, the partisan leaped to one side and whirled his sword. The dark figure threw itself to the ground and nearly cried out.

Jinshan recognized the old lady's voice. "Don't be afraid, old mama," he said quickly. "It's one of our people." He turned to the partisan. "This old lady is Li Yushan's mother."

"Ah, Mrs. Li. I know her, I know her. We're old neighbours!"

The old lady hurried to Jinshan's side. "Son, get back to our army, quickly." She groaned and clutched her chest. "My heart . . . I won't live much longer."

"Old mama, come on. We'll go together."

"No, son, no. You go first."

"But I can't leave you here."

"I'll follow after you slowly. I'll get out. But if anything should happen to me, let Yushan know. Go, son. Three or four miles west of here is the Yangma River. Our army is on the other side. Fly, son. I'm an old woman who may not live to see the morrow. Heavens! We may never meet again."

"This is no place for all this chatter," the partisan interrupted. "You go ahead, comrade. I'll take care of Mrs. Li."

Keeping close to the shadow of a ridge, Jinshan moved cautiously for about a mile, then he began to run. He ran for seven miles without a stop, leaping gullies, plunging down slopes, he ran till his feet burned and the wind whistled in his ears.

At a little stream he paused and drank his fill. He sat down for a moment and found that he couldn't get up again. Every bone in his body ached. The sky was whirling and he had no control over his muscles. He sank dizzily to the ground. The moon went down. Darkness enveloped him.

After a while, Jinshan revived. He was worried. "Shall I go to the liberated area east across the Yellow River? Shall I try to live in hiding among these mountains? Go to KMT-controlled territory? Go home? What a mess! I'd be better off dead!"

Uneasy, he couldn't make up his mind. Then he thought — the enemy must be looking for me — and his strength returned. He stood up. But where should he go? Indecision paralyzed him. He was filled with regret. He hated himself. He remembered the company C.O., the political instructor, the comrades, the old lady. "Can I go back to our army? How can I face anybody? I really made a mess of things!"

He tore his clothes and stamped his feet like a madman. "I brought it on myself," he raged. A spark in his brain was swallowed up in darkness, but then it suddenly burst into flame again, and the darkness receded. He heard a thump on the ground, as if someone had jumped down from a high place. Before he knew what was happening, a dark form grabbed him around the waist from behind and he found himself confronted by a dozen gleaming knives.

"Tie him up," shouted several voices.

Jinshan shivered like a man wearing only a thin shirt in the middle of winter. Old Lord of the Heavens! he thought. I've jumped out of the well into the river.

Just as he was cursing his fate, he noticed that the men were wearing turbans of white towel-cloth. They must be guerillas — or were they enemy plain-clothes men? No, they couldn't be enemy agents. Those guys never dared venture out at night. He was sure he was right. A ray of hope shone in his heart. With a brave air, he demanded:

"Are you guerillas?"

"What if we are? We catch you running dogs of America just as well as anyone."

"What are you talking about, comrade?" Jinshan said righteously. "I'm a soldier of our Field Army."

"This guy's trying to kid us," one of the guerillas cried hotly. "Let's put a hole in his head." He slapped Jinshan a hard blow across the face. Other men slid home the bolts of their rifles.

"What's your hurry, comrades?" said Jinshan. "Call your leader over."

One of the partisans shouted, "Commander Li, come and take a look at this bird."

A man carrying a Mauser pistol walked over. He was tall, and he walked with a firm gait.

"Comrade commander," said Jinshan, "I'm a soldier in the Heroes Detachment, and that's the absolute truth. I've just fallen behind. I've heard a lot about your commander, Li Yushan. His father, Li Zhende, spoke to our battalion only two days ago."

The guerilla leader played the beam of his flashlight on Jinshan's face. "I'm Li Yushan. But I don't know you."

"Are you really Commander Li? You . . . of course you don't know me, but my company C.O., Zhou Dayong, and my company political instructor, Wang Chengde, both know you. They talk about you often."

Yushan took Jinshan's hand. "So you are a comrade in our army. Sorry if we handled you a little rough. Your company commander and political instructor are fine fellows."

The phrase "a comrade in our army" brought an immediate response of warm handshakes and intimate greetings. Someone handed Jinshan a rolled cigarette. Others poured him some drinking water, offered him dry rations. There was much laughter and affectionate swearing.

"Don't be sore at me, comrade," said the young partisan who had just slapped him. "A family's dishes and bowls bump up against each other once in a while even in normal times, to say nothing of these days of turmoil and strife. Come on, you poke me one and we'll be even."

Jinshan laughingly declined. Beside himself with joy, he talked eagerly with the men. It was as if he had really fallen behind in the march and had been rescued in the nick of time after having braved innumerable dangers.

"Your men have great courage, Commander Li," he said. "I certainly will tell the comrades about them when I get back."

Several of the guerillas replied together:

"How can we be anything but courageous? The enemy's got his knife on our neck."

"Our lives are at stake. Anyhow, there's no other road."

The words kept repeating themselves in Jinshan's mind — "There's no other road." When he remembered that he was a deserter from our revolutionary forces, his body turned weak as cotton wool, and the injuries the enemy had inflicted on him suddenly became terribly painful.

"We'll go into the village and have a bite to eat and something to drink, comrade," Yushan said to him. "Then I'll have some men escort you back to the army."

"Commander Li, your old mother . . ." Jinshan wanted to say . . . but the words stuck in his throat.

9

THERE was an air of joyous excitement in First Company today, like a peasant family celebration. The men had swept the courtyard spotlessly clean. A brand-new "bulletin," hanging on the wall, stirred in the breeze. Everything in it had been contributed by the men themselves — topical ballads, poems, short articles — some written in pencil, some in ink. Although they differed greatly in appearance, all were on the same theme — "Welcome to Our New Soldiers."

After the battle of Panlongzhen, the majority of the KMT soldiers captured by the brigade were sent to Shanxi for training. The rest remained to replenish the ranks of the PLA. These were all young men who came from poor, honest families, Soon, the political instructor appeared with about a dozen new soldiers, assigned to First Company. They still wore their yellow KMT uniforms, but had exchanged their old caps for the grey caps of the PLA.

The political instructor led them into the courtyard, where they were greeted with cheers and applause. This habit of clapping the hands was something they were not accustomed to, and they shrank back, rather alarmed.

Political instructor Chengde divided them among the company's squads, then left them on their own to get acquainted.

As one of them entered the quarters of Squad One, the men crowded around him to shake his hand. Someone offered him a bowl of drinking water, another presented him with a shirt, a third gave him a pair of cloth shoes. The men were all smiles as they said:

"The north Shaanxi peasants made these shoes for us. And see what they've written on the soles — 'Wear these shoes and travel fast. With one heart and one mind, beat Chiang Kai-shek.' "

"And look at this. This cloth bag for my bowl was made by the liberated peasants of Shanxi. Isn't the stitching of that embroidered flower fine? And see how nicely they've embroidered — 'To our dear soldier brothers.' "

The new soldier could hardly understand what they were saying. No matter what anyone said to him, he stood stiffly at attention and answered mechanically, "Yessir!" In that friendly, relaxed atmosphere he was like a fish out of water.

"What's your name, comrade?" Tiger Wang, the squad leader, asked.

"Report. I am called Ning Erzi." To the new soldier Tiger looked listless and not very capable. Yet the squad leader seemed a very friendly sort. You couldn't help liking him.

Ning Erzi gazed at the faces of the men around him. Why were they all smiling? How could soldiers have anything to be happy about?

The day he was conscripted into the KMT army he had made a vow that he'd eat offal rather than ever be a soldier again. Weren't there plenty of other things a man could do? Yet when he stepped into Squad One's room, he was drawn by a warmth and affection he had never experienced before. Why? He couldn't figure it out.

The call to assembly sounded, and the men all rushed out and lined up in neat formation, then sat down.

Jinshan, hanging his head, squatted on his heels beside the improvised stage of packed earth. He looked at no one. After being returned to his unit by the guerillas, he had been questioned by the security section of the regiment's political department. It was decided that his was not a political question. No decision had been made as yet on his desertion. Today First Company was holding a rally to welcome the new soldiers. The political department allowed him to take part as a spectator.

Erzi noticed everyone looking at Jinshan, and he overheard a low remark about desertion. He drew a cold breath, for in the KMT army deserters were shot. He remembered one man who had been caught. There had been blood on his face and his hands were trussed behind him. Erzi's heart beat fast.

The men's voices were raised in a chorus of song as political instructor Chengde ascended the earthen platform. He swung his hands in a downward motion, and complete silence fell upon the field.

"We're meeting here today both to welcome the new soldiers and to let the old timers introduce themselves, so we can all get better acquainted. Comrades, first let me say something about our company." Chengde pointed at the fluttering red pennants. "The exploits of our company are inscribed on those pennants. Take a good look at them." Long exposure to the sun and rain had faded the pennants from red to orange. One of them had several dark stains as large as the palm of a hand.

"Comrades, on that pennant are the words — 'First Company — courageous and firm.' Those dark stains are blood — the blood of our company commander, Comrade Zhou Dayong, a famous hero in our brigade. In August 1946, holding this pennant, he was wounded while leading our men in an attack on an enemy strong point." The political instructor described the battle, told how Dayong, holding his bleeding wound, led the company forward to plant the pennant on the enemy position.

Instructor Chengde pointed at the dozen other pennants, and told the story of each briefly. "Now let's have the veterans introduce themselves one by one," he concluded.

Jiangguo jumped to his feet. "Report. If it's veterans we're talking about, our commander, Dayong, is the oldest of the lot. Haven't you heard how the brigadier is always calling him 'Young Old Revolutionary'? I say let the company commander tell us about himself first."

The men applauded enthusiastically, their palms clapping like a whole company of machine-guns.

Smiling, Dayong stood up and faced his men. Every soldier in the company felt that the commander was looking at him personally. They stirred delightedly and edged closer together.

The new soldiers craned their necks to see the company commander. He was the most important man in the unit.

The life of every man in the company rested in his hands! Examining Dayong carefully, Erzi thought — he looks clever and able. I wonder if he hits people? It won't be so funny if he does. He's all muscle.

Dayong walked to the front of the earthen platform. His face was grave, his brows were knit. "New comrades," he said, "the men of our company, if they're not from workers' families, then their families are peasants. In the old society we starved, we were beaten and pushed around, we lived in a fiery pit."

The new soldiers stared at him without batting an eye. It would be more correct to say they were trying to measure him, to fathom his disposition, than listening to his words.

"Take me, for instance. My whole family were slaughtered by the counter-revolutionaries. I was very young when I joined our army. Comrades, without the Communist Party, without the People's Liberation Army, I wouldn't be alive today."

Half of his twenty-four years had been spent in the north. Countless times he had stood on some northern mountain range, a sand-laden wind from beyond the Great Wall blowing about his head, gazing at the stars, thinking of his home in Hunan, recalling the fragrance of fresh growing rice. There was plenty of water and trees around his native village. The soil was fertile and bamboo grew in lush groves. In that village were the most familiar scenes of his childhood, and there the events had transpired which gave him his earliest understanding of life.

Dayong wondered how to tell his story in a way that would help the new soldiers recognize the road which China's workers and peasants ought to take. Memories of his native village, of the bitterest period of his existence, again came to life before his eyes.

In the beginning of March 1936, a unit of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army was marching through Hunan, close to its border with Guizhou. It was hurrying to catch up with its main force — the Second Red Army Group. A beggar child with sharp alert eyes watched from behind some trees near the road. The men wore many different kinds of clothes. Some had red bands on their caps. Others bore oiled-paper umbrellas or conical straw hats strapped to their backs. Several had extra pairs of straw sandals tucked in their belts.

This must be the Red Army, the beggar child thought. Following a raised path between paddy fields, he ran out to the road and grasped the edge of the tunic of one of the Red Army men.

"Aren't you the Red Army? I know you are. Red Army uncle, take me with you. I may be small, but if I can join the Red Army, there's nothing that can scare me."

The soldier pointed at a man in the rear. "Ask him. He'll take you in, for sure."

As the man whom the soldier had indicated approached, the child grabbed his tunic. "Uncle, I want to join the Red Army. Take me in."

This was the regimental commissar, Chen Xingyun — now Brigadier Chen, commander of a PLA brigade.

Chen stepped out of the line of march and looked the child over. The boy was no taller than a carbine. He was all skin and bones. His hair was long and unkempt, like thatch, and his small hands were as skinny as a chicken's claws. Bare-footed, he wore a garment of rags and tatters. But his black, glistening eyes shone with intelligence.

The commissar leaned down and patted the boy's hand. "So you want to join the Red Army? You're not even big enough to carry a rifle. Where is your family?"

"Take me in," the child insisted. He flung aside the small rice bag he had used for begging and clutched the commissar's tunic with both hands. "Take me in, or I won't let you go."

Chen patted him lightly on the back. "You're a tough one, all right. But it's impossible. We're in the middle of a campaign. We march thirty, forty miles a day. How could you keep up?"

The child gazed at the commissar without blinking an eye, but two streams of tears cut rivulets in his grimy cheeks. "I used to be with the Red Army," the boy said. "I'm not afraid of fighting. The Red Army is for the poor people. I've got no home or family. You must take me. I'll starve to death if you don't."

Starve to death? The commissar gripped the child by the shoulders and stared into his eyes. The phrase shook him, for Chen knew how hungry people were willing to give ten years of their life for a mouthful of food. He knew the meaning of that phrase — "starve to death," how many bitter tears, how much untold suffering it contained.

The column continued marching by. And as they passed, the Red Army men looked at the child, and they looked at the commissar, as if beseeching him to take the boy in.

Chen's questioning revealed that the boy was thirteen, though he didn't look more than ten. He was known as Little Bage (only after he joined the Red Army was he given the name of Zhou Dayong). He used to have a father, a mother and elder brother. The father and brother had worked as hired farm hands, and had been treated very badly. Then Red Army units were formed in their neighbourhood and the poor began to see a road to life. But after the Red Army left on the famous Long March to the north-west in October 1934, the countryside where Dayong lived again became a hell. Military units organized by the landlords and gentry roamed through the villages seizing people; beating, cutting heads off, burning down houses. . . . Smoke and flames rose everywhere. Women who had been widows for years lost their only sons, brides of only a few days suddenly lost their husbands, nursing babies crept to their dead mothers' sides and cried themselves hoarse. . . . Streams ran red with the blood of the people. The countryside became a huge slaughterhouse.

Dayong's father and brother both were Communists, and the gentry's White Guards combed the countryside for them. One wild stormy night, father and brother, carrying their short swords, disappeared into the deep mountain forest. The enemy caught Dayong's mother and tried to make her reveal where her husband and son had gone. They set fire to her hair, but she didn't breathe a word. Her body hung from the big tree outside the village for seven days. During the day, Dayong hid in a thicket and watched her corpse, swallowing his tears. At night he crept out and gazed up at her, crying softly, "Ma, ma!"

Later, villagers risked their lives to cut her down and bury her. Dayong would never forget that moment, just after they had groped their way through the dark and lowered his mother's body to the ground — how he threw himself on her and wept aloud! An old lady had put a hand over his mouth and whispered:

"Don't cry! This isn't the time for crying!"

Ah, in those days a person didn't even have the freedom to weep for his dead mother.

An old woman whose son had been burned alive by the counter-revolutionaries had wept till her eyes were almost blind. Now this old neighbour, with no one to support her, took in the motherless child. Dayong had just turned eleven then. Why did such terrible, tragic things happen? Why was his house burned to ashes? Why was a kind-hearted woman like mama hung from a tree? Why did his father and brother have to work like animals year after year, with never a chance to raise their heads? Dayong wasn't very clear on the reason for this endless cruelty. He only knew he hated the pack of murdering brutes and he longed for a chance to see his father and brother again.

Time ground on slowly, through fire and blood.

Early in 1936, when Dayong had just reached thirteen, he began to earn his own living tending pigs and cattle and doing short time jobs as a hired hand.

That year, on the first of February, Dayong's father stole back into the village and took the boy away with him. It was then that Dayong learned his brother had died fighting in the Red Army.

Dayong's father became a cook in one of the Red Army's guerilla units. When they marched, Dayong went along. When they camped, Dayong slept at his father's side.

"In our village, if we leaned on a mountain, the mountain moved; if we leaned on a wall, the wall fell down," his father used to say. "The Red Army is the only real support we've got. Maybe others can get along without a revolution, but we either revolt or die."

There was no end of trouble to torment good people in those days. After Dayong and his father had been in the Red Army for three weeks, tragedy struck. Their unit was surrounded by the enemy. As they were breaking out of the encirclement, Dayong's father was killed. A Red Army soldier with seven wounds in his body ran a mile virtually carrying Dayong, then died in a pool of blood. Dayong continued running alone half the night. He succeeded in getting away from the enemy, but he also lost contact with the guerilla unit.

Hardship dogged his footsteps from then on. He begged from door to door during the day. At night he slept beneath the eaves of a house or, if he was lucky, in some little temple. With no one to rely on for his food, clothing, or shelter, the child drifted about on life's heavy seas. He never gave up searching for his own forces — the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army. Now, by chance, he had run into them at last.

Finishing the simple recital of the story of his life, Dayong looked at the men with tears in his eyes. "I was a homeless beggar child, comrades," he said. "The Communist Party and Chairman Mao brought me up to be a man. They taught me to understand many things, comrades, but the most important thing they taught me was this — If we don't take up our guns and fight, we'll always remain trampled underfoot. Comrades, we've got guns in our hands now and we know what we're using them for. That's why our kind of people — people who've been down-trodden for generations — are going to shake the whole world!"

No one made a sound.

All the old soldiers of First Company knew Dayong's story well, yet hearing him tell it, they were again deeply moved.

The new soldiers, as they listened, grew thoughtful. So their company commander had been a beggar child only ten or twelve years before. His life had been bitter, just like their own. He was one of them. The company commander today was the personification of brightness and hope! It was as if the wind suddenly blew away the dark clouds and revealed the lovely red sun in the clear blue sky.

Many of the new soldiers wanted to speak, but they were not accustomed to talking before so large an audience, and they held back. Someone had to give them the lead.

A veteran next to Jinshan nudged him. "Why don't you say a few words?" he whispered.

But Jinshan only held his head in his hands and wept. What could he say? His lot had been crueler than anyone's — homeless, unwanted, he had suffered terribly in the old society. But after what he had done, how could he face his comrades?

New soldier Ning Erzi stirred restlessly. He looked very agitated. Tiger Wang could see that he was anxious to speak but didn't have the courage. He called to Erzi to stand up and talk. The men around him shouted encouragement.

Erzi rose to his feet. He could feel his legs trembling. He wanted to say — Poor peasants never earn enough to pay their rent; they starve and have to eat the bark of the locust tree. . . . But his mind was in a turmoil. His thoughts ran in all directions and he stumbled from one event to another as he spoke. What he told were the same heart-breaking experiences that all the other soldiers had suffered too, the same sort of things which wrung blood and tears from workers and peasants all over China. Rubbing his eyes and awkwardly twisting the edge of his tunic, Erzi dropped his head.

"Today our family is scattered, I don't know where. I haven't heard from my brother Ning Jinshan in seven years.

Jinshan pushed his way forward and hurried up to Erzi. He stared at the new soldier. "Your brother — your brother is Ning Jinshan?" he cried. "Then you're Ning Erzi — Ning Erzi from Zhujia Village?"

The men had been weeping with their heads down. But when they heard Jinshan's cry their eyes lit up, and everyone rushed to gather round the reunited brothers.

Chapter Three

On the East Gansu Plateau

1

EARLY one morning, Dayong and political instructor Chengde attended a meeting at brigade headquarters. Brigadier Chen announced that they were about to begin a new campaign. By the time the meeting ended and Chengde and Dayong returned to their company, the sun was already hanging over the western mountains.

After going through their notes, they drew a large map of north Shaanxi on rough locally-made paper showing the general deployment of the enemy's troops, then summoned a meeting of First Company's officers and noncoms.

The members of the company's Communist Party branch committee, as well as the leaders of the various Party groups also came to the meeting. They had had baths and haircuts after the Panlongzhen campaign, their grey uniforms were washed and mended, and they looked very spruce and neat.

Chengde came directly to the point. "Comrades," he said, "we're going to fight." His voice was low and even, but it drew the attention of every man like a magnet.

"These are the enemy's positions," he said, pointing at the map. "After scurrying back from Suide, Hu Zongnan's main force has been sticking close to Yanan." He moved his finger to a place far to the west. "This is the East Gansu Area of our Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region."

Chengde then pointed at the north-west corner of Shaanxi Province near the Great Wall. "This is the Sanbian Area. In March, when Hu Zongnan was attacking Yanan, the Ningxia warlord Ma Hongkui and the Qinghai warlord Ma Bufang took advantage of our being busy with Hu Zongnan and occupied both our East Gansu and Sanbian Areas. Since then they've been 'mopping up,' slaughtering, burning, making life hell for the people. That's the enemy's situation, comrades. We've come together to talk things over, to discuss how we should fight our next battle."

Quanyou spoke up: "My idea is not to bother about the warlord bandits now. They're vegetables in the basket. We can cook them any time we're ready. First we ought to concentrate on Hu Zongnan."

The leader of Squad Six agreed. "Right. When you're chasing crooks, first nab the leader. Knock-off Hu Zongnan and then we'll see about the next step."

Jiangguo thrust himself forward. "You're off the track, comrades," he cried. "You can't fight any way that suits your fancy; it all depends on the enemy's set-up. If we shut our eyes to what they're doing and thinking, we can sit around gabbing like this from now into the middle of next week and still not settle anything."

"I may not be saying anything new," instructor Chengde inserted, "but Chiang Kai-shek is finding the going rougher every day. He wants Hu Zongnan to finish up in north Shaanxi quickly so that he can use Hu's soldiers on other battlefields."

Changsheng's muffled tones sounded as if he were sitting inside a vat. "Hu came here easy enough, but he won't find leaving quite so simple. Let him try it."

"That's right," said Dayong. "The enemy know that if they don't wipe us out we're going to smash their cooking pot. So they're plotting to finish us off."

"Let 'em plot," said Jiangguo. "We've seen all their dumb tricks. There's nothing inside that Hu Zongnan. He's stuffed with grass."

The instructor again pointed at the map. "South of Yanan is our Guanzong Area. Hu wants to move his troops there north, while the warlord army in the East Gansu Area drives east, and both join Hu's main force near Yanan to surround us in the district of Ansai and annihilate us. You see, the enemy's got everything all figured out."

"Hu Zongnan's forces are bunched together in a tough knot. Right now, we can't sink our teeth into 'em," said the leader of Platoon One. "First we ought to settle those warlord bastards. That'll break one claw of the enemy pincers."

"That's right," Dayong agreed. "They want to come at us from all sides and encircle us. The idea is not to wait for them to move, but slam into them first. Besides upsetting their pincer plan, we can pick them off one at a time before they have a chance to join up."

"It's well over a hundred miles from here to east Gansu," said one of the squad leaders, "through big forests. And if we continue on to Sanbian, we'll have to cross the desert. That's something we ought to think about."

"Forests and deserts can't scare us," retorted Jiangguo. "But I don't agree that we should go to east Gansu and Sanbian anyhow. The first thing we ought to do is get rid of Hu Zongnan's army, so that Chairman Mao and the Central Committee can go back to Yanan."

"Oh," said Dayong, "so it's all right to fight a war of movement around Yanan, but not to stretch the movement into any long marches, is that it? What kind of military thinking is that, I ask you, comrades!"

"Suppose headquarters wants us to go to east Gansu, then what?" instructor Chengde asked the men.

"Then we'll go, of course," said Changsheng.

The atmosphere in the room was heavy. No one uttered a sound. Chengde supported his chin with his fist and stared fixedly ahead.

Tiger Wang rose awkwardly to his feet. Head lowered, lightly scuffing a couple of pebbles on the ground before him, he said slowly, "If our leaders want us to fight in east Gansu, we'll do it, come what may. But if they haven't decided yet, and want us to talk it over and make suggestions . . . well . . . then. . . . Honestly, I don't know. . . . Comrades, I don't know where we ought to fight first." Tiger smiled with embarrassment, then narrowed his eyes and pondered.

"Our leaders have already decided to launch a campaign in east Gansu, comrades," the political instructor announced. "We're going there to attack the warlords. Now this may look as if we're dropping the most important enemy in the north-west — Hu Zongnan. Actually, it'll tighten our grip on him. The enemy will be afraid that we'll be able to cut around from east Gansu to their rear; so whichever way we turn, Hu Zongnan will follow right behind us. Besides, if we knock off Hu's allies one by one, that will isolate him and make it easier for us to finish him. So far as the enemy still occupying our Yanan is concerned, that's not important. Their main interest is in taking places, ours is in destroying troops and winning the war."

After the meeting broke up, instructor Chengde sat on the high doorstep, propping his head in his hands. He was feeling very irritated with himself. Dayong, facing the wall, stood punching it with his fist. He turned around abruptly and said:

"Today's meeting was a fizzle. It's the damnedest thing.

Nothing ever goes smoothly. Chengde, let's have another meeting of the company's Party branch committee. We'll tackle this thing again from the beginning. There's nothing in this world that's so damned hard if you really try."

Three days later, the night of May 21, there was not a breath of wind; not a blade of grass stirred. A full moon, riding high in the heavens, lit up the mountains and valleys almost as bright as day.

The gorges and ravines in and around Zhenwu Caves were filled with the troops of the North-west Field Army, ready to march. Except for an occasional cough here and there, the men were silent. Even the strings of pack animals, laden with parts of the dismantled mountain guns, made no noise. They too seemed to understand that it was necessary to be especially quiet.

Just before the brigade set out, instructor Chengde received an order to go with several officers in the regiment's political department to the banks of the Yellow River and pick up a detachment of new soldiers who had completed their training. Chengde's political duties in the company were temporarily handed over to Dayong.

The march began as usual — very crowded and with no apparent order. Soldiers, peasant stretcher bearers, pack animals crossed each other's lines in every direction. Not until the brigade had gone three or four miles did it really settle down into a smooth formation. One column in this gorge, one in that, different streams of marching men, all flowing towards the same objective.

With the dawn, the marchers' spirits rose, and the chilly valleys again warmed to life. Members of the brigade and regiment's political departments, stationed every five or six hundred yards along the line, loudly explained the significance of the new campaign and stressed the points for attention in the course of the march. On the slopes, beside the road, about every twenty yards or so an encouraging slogan or cartoon was posted. As they climbed a high mountain, the men could hear a voice shouting from the top through a megaphone, to the accompaniment of drums and gongs:

We skip over mountains as if they were kegs,
We're fearless heroes with iron legs. . . .

In addition, each company provided its own good cheer. The men told stories and jokes, recited ballads, sang folk songs.

At noon, the PLA troops entered a large valley.

Dayong marched in the fore of his company. Ahead and behind he could see an endless line of marching men, twisting with the convolutions of the mountain road. Dayong felt like a drop of water in a mighty stream, a tiny cell in a powerful organism; he could have no life apart from this entity.

When he looked ahead again, the advance units had already entered a dark mountain forest.

The men had been marching for a night and two days. As the sun was pressing on the western hills, they made camp in the trackless forest. Lean-tos were set up against the big trees. Smoke rose from the cooking pots and filtered through the branches into the sky, dyed crimson with the setting sun.

In the wooded ravines, artillerymen fed their pack animals. Several men stripped and bathed, singing, in the brooks. Some chased each other around the large tree trunks. A mounted messenger ambled up a slope, leading the horse by the reins. He stopped, and the horse stopped too. He ran, and the horse trotted after him. He whistled, and the horse swung its head from side to side and rhythmically pawed the ground.

The forest rang with the songs and laughter of the PLA fighters.

Li Cheng, the regiment's political commissar, came walking up the slope. Tall, with a thin face, he gave the impression of having limitless energy stored in that spare frame of his.

He stopped to talk to sentries on guard at the edge of the forest. He chatted with the cooks busy over their fires. He exchanged a few words with other commissars and political instructors.

Li Cheng paused and leaned against a tree. Birds in its branches were chirruping and fluttering, not at all used to having thousands of men suddenly bustling about in their peaceful surroundings. The young escort accompanying Li Cheng was tempted to pick up a stone and fling it at one of the birds' nests, but he was afraid of disturbing the contemplations of the commissar. As a matter of fact Li Cheng was listening to an argument a few soldiers were having not far off:

"Liang Shide should be credited with a merit. On the march he carried a rifle for a man who was tired, and when we camped he helped the cook fetch water."

"Nothing doing! He trampled a peasant's young sprouts during the march too. That's going against the interests of the people. But instead of admitting it before us all the same day, he didn't say a word. That shows he hasn't got much class consciousness."

"Never mind the speeches. Give him credit for what he did good and mark him down for what he did wrong. They're two different things."

"I like that! Who says they're two different things?"

Motionless, Li Cheng listened, considered. As had happened a thousand times before, he again was hearing valuable

ideas expressed in the words of the fighting men. They were shining, concrete ideas, almost solid enough to reach out and touch with your hand.

Whenever he had the chance, Li Cheng liked to bring his bedding and spend the night in one of the companies; for it was when he was living together with the men that he could most clearly feel their intelligence and ideas, their demands and hopes, flowing into his brain. He could sort through these jumbled impressions and quickly put them in order. At times, when he was beset with problems, one remark from a soldier or junior officer provided the key to the solution of them all, and made him inordinately happy.

He observed Dayong rushing by, on the other side of a big tree, and asked him where he was going. Dayong said he had just finished a meeting of the company's Party branch and was about to discuss some of the questions raised at the meeting with his men.

While Li Cheng and Dayong were talking, two soldiers came wearily up the slope. They sat down on a log, lit their pipes and began to chat.

"If I told the company C.O. about that letter your father sent you," said one of them with a laugh, "he'd be sure to report it to the commissar. Then you'd be in a fix."

"What did I ever do to you that you should treat me like that? Our commissar's eyes are sharp. Even if you keep your mouth shut, he's liable to find out anyway. We're pals, aren't we? You ought to cover up for me," the other soldier jested.

"Don't worry, I won't spill anything. But just between us, the way you're acting — no wonder the old man's upset."

"He really speaks up, now that our village's been liberated and we've been given some land. He ends his letter saying, 'I haven't heard a word from you in over half a year.

If we don't get a letter from you soon, I'm going to write and criticize your political commissar. What is he doing? What kind of guidance is he giving my son?' My heart started to beat like mad when I saw that. Suppose the old man really — "

"Your father is absolutely right, Niu Zicai," said a voice from the shadows. "He ought to criticize me. He has every right to."

"Oho, the commissar! How in the world did he hear us?"

The two soldiers leaped up as if fire had licked at their heels. They were both startled and amused.

"You haven't written to your family for a long time?" Li Cheng asked.

"Not a word since we crossed the Yellow River," Niu Zicai mumbled. Li Cheng turned to Dayong, standing beside the tree. "What do you have to say?"

"I'm responsible too," Dayong replied, vaguely resentful and defensive. He had the feeling that the commissar was always shifting the blame in these matters over to him as company commander.

"We make a mess of things and then we thump ourselves on the chest and say — I'll be responsible. Responsible how? Bah! Empty talk." Li Cheng turned back to the young soldier and said, "A man without feelings and affection doesn't make a very good revolutionary soldier. Niu Zicai, tomorrow when we pitch camp again, you write a letter to your family. Remember now!"

After the two soldiers had departed, Li Cheng and Dayong continued their stroll through the woods. The commissar's cigarette glowed in the dark. A breeze rustled the leaves and brought with it the fragrance of mountain flowers. Flocks of honking geese crossed overhead.

"It's lovely here," said Li Cheng. "Some day, when the war is over, we can come back here for a vacation. Maybe some of the little lean-tos we built will still be standing."

"Yes," Dayong agreed listlessly. He had little interest at the moment in the calls of birds or fragrant flowers. That matter of the letter of Niu Zicai was eating at his heart. What devil had made him so blind? Though he was with the men day and night, they had problems he knew nothing about. Yet the moment commissar Li Cheng came around, all the questions he — Dayong — hadn't discovered, had to pop out and show their ugly faces.

Li Cheng guessed what was troubling him. "Thinking about Niu Zicai's letter?" he asked. "Interesting, eh? Looks like you didn't know anything about it, comrade."

"I didn't," Dayong admitted frankly.

"A good officer even knows what every man in his unit says in his sleep. Have you noticed that? Like one of these young peasant mothers and her suckling babe. We can't make head or tail out of its croons and gurgles, but the mother understands it perfectly. What's more, she has a wonderful time talking with the kid. Sometimes she'll be sifting wheat out in the courtyard and suddenly she'll run in the house to put some more clothes on her month-old infant. Ask her why and she'll tell you she had a feeling the baby was cold. See what I mean? Mother and child both have the same feelings. An officer should be like the best of mothers. Think it over, Dayong. Everything in life has a lesson for us. . . . Hadn't you better be turning in?"

Leaving Dayong, Li Cheng walked on among the trees, treading a thick carpet of fallen leaves, in the direction of the lean-to where the regimental commanders slept. Deep in the forest a bird was singing with soft and clear notes. He could hear the sound of flowing water nearby and the drone of insects. A small animal the size of a cat slipped past him and scurried up a big tree. Birds nesting in the tree, startled into wild flight, brushed against the leafy branches. Li Cheng stopped to look up. He watched and listened with great interest.

2

DAY and night, the North-west Field Army drove through the mountain forests towards the west.

On the march, most commanders rode at the head of their units, issuing occasional orders that were passed back down the line. Regimental commissar Li Cheng was different. Though he usually started out riding beside Zhao Jin, commander of the regiment, after the regiment had gone a mile or two, he would dismount and stand by the roadside. As each commissar or political instructor under his command went by, he would give them instructions. Sometimes he would march along with one of the companies, chatting with the men to discover to what extent they understood the strategy and tactics of the campaign. Then he would again step out of line and give more instructions to the political officers. After the entire regiment had passed, he would remount and gallop to the head of his unit.

One day he fell in beside Dayong. Because he was serving as political instructor concurrently with his job as company C.O., in addition to his pistol and ration bag Dayong now also carried a rucksack containing Party documents and other material.

"We go into battle the day after tomorrow," Li Cheng said. "How are the men feeling?"

"Fine."

"Have you any problems in rallying the men before the battle?"

"Not one."

Li Cheng looked at him. After a long pause, the commissar said in a low voice, "Have you reached that conclusion after careful investigation? Are you prepared to be responsible for every word you say?"

Hearing it put that way, Dayong didn't know what to say.

"Is it true that some of the men are annoyed at having to carry such a full load of rations?"

"Well, some of the new soldiers don't like the idea much."

"I just heard Li Jiangguo, in your company, singing a Shanxi ballad. He made up verses to it that went like this:

Our ration bags may be heavy as lead
But they're our big supply base,
Don't be groaning they're breaking your back
We'll win if we can feed our face!"

Dayong laughed. "I've heard it. Jiangguo is great at ditties."

"You've heard it? Then why haven't you taught every man in the company to sing it? What better teaching method is there than letting the men learn from each other?" He pointed at the ration bag on Dayong's shoulders. "Is your bag any different from the one the men are carrying?"

"It's the same, commissar. They're all just as heavy."

"Well, it shouldn't be the same, Comrade Dayong. We're always waiting for our superior officers to tell us how to do everything, instead of learning from the life all around us."

A dozen questions flashed into Dayong's mind. He looked in the commissar's sharp, intelligent eyes and considered what he had said.

"What I mean is that you ought to make your ration bag serve an even more useful purpose than the ones the men are carrying." Li Cheng took a letter out of his pocket. "This should be read by every officer in the regiment at once. It was sent to the regiment's political department. It says that although the new soldiers in most companies are complaining about carrying heavy ration bags, the new soldiers in Ninth Company don't mind at all, in fact they're glad to do it. The reason is this: The political instructor of Ninth Company said to his men, 'This heavy ration bag makes me tired too, comrades. But why am I willing to carry it?' He told them of his experiences in battle, how rations had often saved his life. Then he had other veterans tell about what carrying their own food had meant to them. I think this method is a lot better than just preaching abstract principles to our men."

The light dawned on Dayong at last. His face lit up with a grin. He wanted to grab the commissar's hand and thank him.

"You can try that method in your own company," said Li Cheng. "You'll probably find doing it will take more effort than talking about it." He pondered as he walked, then he suddenly looked at Dayong and said, "Take effort? So what? One of the reasons the Party raised you to a position of leadership is because you've got more drive than the average man. The energy one man puts out can only move one machine; the energy you put out can move ten."

Li Cheng mounted his horse and jiggled its reins. Turning his head, he said to Dayong in parting, "The brain is a wonderful instrument, Dayong. But if you don't think with it, it's of no more use than that stone by the side of the road."

He cantered towards the head of the column, the dust churned up by his horse's hoofs obscuring him from sight.

Dayong stared after the lengthening cloud of dust. How lucky I am to be able to go into battle shoulder to shoulder with a man like that, he thought.

After marching for sixteen hours, the brigade halted and made camp.

A meeting of officers was to be held in half an hour. Li Cheng sat cross-legged on the brick oven-bed of the peasant in whose home he was quartered, elbows resting on his knees, hands supporting his chin, sunk in thought. His stomach rumbled, and he asked aloud, "Haven't I eaten?" It would have been better if he hadn't mentioned it, for now his stomach was reminded of how hungry it really was.

His young orderly was very annoyed with him. "I've been looking all over for you. The minute we camped, you went off on a tour of the companies. Who knows whether you've eaten or not."

Li Cheng frowned. "You're battling against me all day, comrade," he sighed. He couldn't think of an appropriate way to "tell off" the youngster. In all fairness, he had to admit the orderly was a fine comrade with a strong sense of responsibility. "All right," he said, "tell the cook. Anything at all will do. But quickly."

No sooner had the orderly gone out the door than Li Cheng recalled something. He hopped down from the brick oven-bed and left the house. He walked very rapidly, very evenly, head down, thinking as he went. Before long, he was seated in the cave-dwelling where First Company was quartered.

Dayong stood leaning against the wall. The men, the messengers running in and out — all irritated him. Yesterday the commissar had criticized him for a tendency to assume that his own thoughts and feelings were those of his men. And today — why couldn't his work ever go smoothly? He felt like punching himself in the head.

Li Cheng watched him, and his shining eyes seemed to penetrate right into Dayong's heart.

"Did a man desert from your company today?" Li Cheng asked.

Dayong started. The commissar got news fast. There had been a desertion only twenty minutes ago, yet before Dayong had a chance to report it, here was the commissar, checking up.

"A man tried to run away, but he was caught and brought back," said Dayong.

Li Cheng rose and walked over to the table. Leaning with both hands on the edge of it, he looked directly at Dayong and said:

"His running away and your bringing him back are two different things. What I want to talk to you about now is only his running away. It was Yin Gendi, wasn't it? I thought so. I talked with him yesterday during the march, and afterwards I told you what my impressions of him were. All right, then, tell me. Why did he run away?"

An oppressive atmosphere crowded in on Dayong like a crushing wave. The commissar's words made him very angry. He worked all day till he was dizzy, but the superior officers never saw that. No, but they kept at you with a whole string of questions.

For a long time Dayong thought of how to answer Li Cheng. Only when the commissar repeated his question did Dayong finally say:

"It's still the same old problem. A man hears someone shooting his mouth off — east Gansu is all mountains and no water; it's killingly hot. . . . Some of them get scared."

"Scared? There are always people who are scared. If there weren't, what would we need Communists for?"

"Besides, after our political instructor left . . ." Dayong hardly knew what he was saying. He only knew he felt badly and a little sorry for himself.

"Oh? Did your political instructor take your company's Communist Party organization away with him in his rucksack?" Li Cheng laughed. He wanted to ease the tension. "Call the members of your Party branch committee."

A few minutes later they were all standing before the commissar — Tiger Wang, Changsheng, Jiangguo, Quanyou and old Sun, the cook.

Li Cheng looked them over carefully, as if meeting them for the first time.

The men anxiously waited for his opening remark. They were sure it would be a scorcher.

"You have ninety-six men in this company," Li Cheng said thoughtfully, "but many of them you don't understand. You don't understand them at all." His tone was pleasant, not nearly so severe as they had expected.

"Not ninety-six," Jiangguo corrected him. "Our company has ninety-seven."

"You ought to say ninety-six, comrade," said the commissar.

"Ninety-seven is right," Changsheng insisted.

"Didn't one man desert?" asked Li Cheng.

"Oh, but he didn't get away." Jiangguo felt much better. No wonder the commissar has such a long face, he thought. He didn't know that Yin Gendi was brought back.

"Ninety-six is still all you can figure," said Li Cheng. "Yin Gendi tried to desert because he didn't know what he was fighting for, or who he was fighting for. That kind of soldier, comrades, cannot be counted as one of our ranks."

"Don't count him, then," drawled Tiger Wang.

"But that hardly solves the problem, does it? There are also a few more questions, I think, we ought to discuss."

Then the commissar asked: Where is Yin Gendi from? How old is he? What's his background? How many years had he been a soldier in the reactionary KMT army? What kind of disposition does he have? After he joined First Company what exactly did its officers and Party members do to help him? . . .

The members of the company's Party branch committee made a few halting answers, then looked at one another uneasily.

Li Cheng didn't say a word.

Old Sun, the cook, stood swallowing hard.

"We've been so busy," Tiger Wang said in a low voice, "we didn't have time —"

"A revolution is a very busy affair, Tiger," Li Cheng interrupted.

"All the new soldiers who come from a good background and whose thinking is good go to other companies," Quanyou complained. "We always get the ones nobody else wants."

"Fine. Quanyou's dug himself a nice air-raid shelter where he can hide from criticism." After a pause, the commissar went on, " 'An army is permanent like iron, but soldiers come and go like flowing water' — that's the way it is in the enemy's army, whose soldiers desert at will. Our men are fighting for their own class. Yet why do some of them desert? The blame rests on me, and on you. The Party entrusts us with the new soldiers; it wants us to take good care of them. But are we doing it? Although Yin Gendi has been in your company three days, you haven't even taken the first steps towards understanding him, to say nothing of treating him like a brother."

"He just came, and before he even said how d'you do, he deserted," grumbled Quanyou. "No backbone. He can't be any good."

"What right have you to say he isn't any good?" Li Cheng demanded. "When Yin Gendi joined our big family, our company, in the first place he didn't get any affectionate care from the company's Communists, and in the second place no one helped him understand the difference between a revolutionary and a counter-revolutionary army. No wonder he deserted." Li Cheng stood up and stared at the left corner of the room, his mind racing. Then his eyes swept the face of every man as he said, "I want you to find time to call a meeting of your whole Party branch and, starting with this question, see what other shortcomings there are in your work. Dayong is to report your findings to me the day after tomorrow during the morning march."

No sooner had the committee members gone than the company messenger, Little Cheng, came in.

"Why is your neck so black?" Li Cheng asked him.

"Don't look at my neck, commissar, look at my feet," the boy replied. "My feet are washed clean and white."

"That must be because your neck right now isn't as much use to the revolution as your feet, eh?"

"That's the general idea."

Laughing, Li Cheng held the boy's arms and looked him over. "How does an imp like you manage to get so chubby with all your running around? Does every mouthful of water you swallow turn to fat?"

The commissar glanced at Dayong. "What are you thinking about? I must have got you all upset."

"No, it's not you, commissar. I just feel rotten, and very ashamed."

"Ah, well, that's understandable. But it seems to me you'd be much better off putting your energy into thinking how to do your work well. Now please give me a bite to eat, but quickly. I've got a meeting at regiment in five minutes.

After I've gone you'll probably hop three feet into the air and cuss me for a trouble-making fault-finder. Right?"

Li Cheng's jesting didn't lessen Dayong's gloom in the slightest. "No, of course not," he said. "Commissar, I can't promise to do a good job all of a sudden, but I certainly know how to try. But there's something else. . . ."

"Something else?"

"Of course Yin Gendi deserted because we didn't do our work well. But a man like that — he and some of the other new soldiers got to talking. They told one another of their sufferings under the KMT . . . it taught him a lot . . . he knows what class hatred means. I really can't understand him. Even if you talk yourself dry you can't creep into his mind." Dayong's fists were balled up and his face was red with emotion. "I just can't understand. What more can anyone ask than a chance to fight for the people? But some men waver so. I can't figure it out. What kind of brains have they got?"

"Dayong," said the commissar, "you look at things too simply. Before a man becomes a firm fighter for his class he has to be steeled and we have to do a lot of painstaking work. You mustn't think just because he spills out his grievances at a meeting and you talk with him a couple of times, that all problems are solved. Ah, you, you're still so young and impetuous." He gazed at Dayong for a moment, then continued. "When a man isn't straight in his thinking, you have to help him criticize himself. You have to make him want to correct his own faults. Even a punishment is no use unless he considers it justified. As for the work in your company, the 'Model Company' banner you fellows got from the regiment's Party committee is the best proof of what we think of it. No one can take that credit away from you. It's just that there are still shortcomings here that are holding us back."

Gradually, Dayong calmed down. Looking at the commissar, he could feel a tremendous vitality spreading through his body.

3

THE sun cast its fiery rays on the East Gansu Plateau. The very dust of the road seemed to burn. In the grass, on the trees, the cicadas droned incessantly.

A small river flowed through the valley. These same waters had lapped against the city walls of Huanxian, a county seat. Groups of PLA men were holding meetings in the cool shade of small thickets dotting the river's banks. Other men, bathing in the river, splashed each other in a mock battle. The sound of their cheerful shouts could be heard from afar.

Dayong walked along the river. He was wearing a shirt of coarse cloth which he had just washed. His sleeves were rolled up to the elbows. He carried a small towel.

After a month of fighting and marching on the East Gansu Plateau, Dayong had grown tougher. His face was sunburnt almost black and he was feeling fine. Striding along, he was the picture of health and cheerfulness.

A little bird flying overhead uttered a strange shrill cry. Dayong stopped at a big tree and squinted up through the leafy branches. He thought the bird was in the tree, and he circled it, trying to get a glimpse of the maker of that peculiar sound. He flung a stone up, but nothing flew out. Impatiently, he walked away, but he kept looking back at the tree. Maybe I can climb up at night and grab the bird in its nest, he thought. But maybe it nests in the wheat fields. It sure must be a tricky bird.

"You don't seem to have a care in the world, son!" someone hailed him as he entered the compound where his company was quartered. He turned to see the old peasant lady who owned the house. "Come and have some cool noodles." Smiling affectionately, she stood proffering him a bowl.

"You want to refuse me again, is that it?" she demanded. "My eldest boy went off with the Red Army during the Land Revolution, but now that our army is here and you're living in my house, it's as if he's come back again. If you try any of that false politeness on me and say 'No, thank you,' again, I'll drive you out of my door. Now let's see you dare to refuse."

"You've convinced me, old mama, but you can't convince my stomach!" said Dayong mischievously. "I just finished eating. I'm so stuffed I haven't room for even a swallow of water. I won't eat, but I certainly thank you for your kindness."

"Those thanks are as empty as your stomach," said the old lady fretfully. "Don't eat then! From now on I'm not going to bother about you or any of the other men in your company. And I won't allow a single one of you to help me draw water, or split kindling, or mow hay. I won't stand for any of you lifting a finger."

"Old mama," Dayong whispered in her ear, "when instructor Chengde comes back, we'll both have a meal with you. I promise to eat eighteen bowls — if you've got enough to fill them."

"That's more like it," said the old lady. Noticing that a button was loose on Dayong's tunic, she got a needle and thread from her sewing kit and sewed the button on tight.

"I can tell by your neat bearing and intelligent eyes that you must be very able, son," she said.

"Me, able?" Dayong laughed and changed the subject. "Is that your rooster? What a fine looking bird. Why haven't I seen him before?"

"You may not have seen him, but he's seen you all right. But tell me, son, you men won't be leaving again?"

"That's hard to say."

"You'd better not. If you all go off and leave us old folks and children alone and Chairman Mao hears about it, he'll be very angry." The old lady bit off the thread. "Not so long ago, people here were worried. But I thought to myself — Our border region is an old Communist base; our army won't let the enemy just move in and stay here. And sure enough, a few days later, you men came. Were we glad to see you!"

From the time he was very young Dayong had been a homeless orphan. But everywhere he went was like his own home; everywhere he went were folks who cared for him like a mother and father. His heart surged with happiness.

The old lady went out and was gone for a long time. Dayong sat alone in the courtyard, chewing on a tender blade of grass, his back against the wall, his eyes half shut. Her sewing and the way the old lady spoke reminded him of his childhood.

. . . He was ten and it was his birthday — which fell on the day of the Dragon Boat Festival in early summer. His family had just received some land and a share of the local gentry's fine clothing. His mother was feeling particularly good, for she had altered a long gown into a suit of clothes for him. The night before his birthday he was so thrilled he couldn't sleep, and he got up early in the morning before it was light. He put on his new clothes and his mother tacked on a red armband, saying this meant he was in the Red Army. He was much too excited to eat any of the goodies his mother had prepared for the festival, but dashed out of the door like a colt that had slipped its halter.

Down at the edge of the pond he got into a mud fight with some of his pals. In the flash of an eye his beautiful blue clothing was a spattered muddy mess. Bubbling over with high spirits, he joined a tree-climbing contest and ripped his pants. When he got home and his mother saw the state he was in, she threw him down and beat him hard. Dayong's character was stubborn even then; he cried from noon to late afternoon. His mother washed his clothes and sat mending them in the courtyard. Finally, she couldn't bear to see him weep any longer. Holding him close to her as she continued her mending, she told him a story.

And what a wonderful story it was! About a marvellous genie, long, long ago, who could make the wind blow and the rain fall and the heavens and earth spin. He was so tall he could touch the sky, yet he could change himself into a little fish no bigger than a finger. At first the people who tilled the land didn't know his power, and they offended him. He threw a handful of grass into the river and — the grass turned into a big school of fish. The peasants jumped into the water to catch the fish and stayed so long that they were late with their harvesting.

After they knew how powerful he was, they came to him with all their pleas. He was a good-hearted genie, and he never refused anyone. One year, there was no rain and the river went dry. It was a dangerous situation for the land tillers. They begged him to save them. He pricked his finger and sprinkled a few drops of blood in the sky. Immediately, rain fell in bucketsful; the river filled with flowing water. A drought was averted, but there wasn't enough

time left to transplant the rice sprouts. Frantic with worry, the peasants again pleaded for the genie's help. The genie took a big wheat sifter and clamped it over the sun so that it couldn't move. When the transplanting was finished, he removed the sifter. The sun scooted out of sight beyond the western horizon. All was dark. But a few minutes later the east began to turn light, and cocks crowed to herald the dawn.

After hearing his mother's story, Dayong never ceased searching for that genie, to learn his magic. Right up to the time he joined the Red Army he even saw him in his dreams — sixty feet tall, tremendously strong, a kind heart, but very stern. . . . He often had this dream.

And Dayong thought of the many other times he had listened to stories. Some his mother told him as she sewed in the tiny light of an oil lamp. Usually it was late at night, when the wind howled through the tree tops, and outside the window he could see the blinking starts. Some were stories the old lady next door told him as she sat spinning. She was blind, and her only pleasures in life were telling these fascinating tales and listening to the hum of her spinning wheel and the croaking of frogs on a summer's night. Some were the stories of the white-bearded old grandpa who lived at the west end of the village. At dusk when he finished cutting his rice, the old man would sit with his back against a tree beside the stream and tell stories while gazing at the tobacco embers blowing in his pipe. Sometimes the old man would drift into a reverie in the middle of his tale, and say nothing for a long time. Yet on other occasions he was very lively, and went right through without a stop.

The voices of the story-tellers were kindly and sweet, and a little deep, and they embroidered the narratives to suit their fancy. But what a world of wisdom and dreams their tales brought to the pure, naive children who listened to them.

Some people never lose their childhood memories, even when their hair is grey. The voices of dear ones, ancient folk tales, the scenes of their native village . . . yes, the hardships too — all remain deeply impressed on their minds. With people like Dayong, the long years on the fields of battle not only failed to obliterate these memories, but, if anything, intensified them. For the things he recalled included the bitter as well as the sweet, hard work, beautiful wishes, and an irresistible life force.

4

ONE night, at two in the morning, the call of bugles woke the PLA men from their dreams.

A meal had been prepared. Still half asleep, the men scooped rice from a big cauldron and mechanically downed several bowls each. One cauldron was soon finished. In the two minutes that elapsed before the second one could be brought up, many of the men again fell asleep and leaned snoring against the compound wall. But as soon as the rice arrived they immediately resumed eating, more as if they were performing a duty than satisfying a need.

At three a.m. they set out. Cavalry and artillery columns criss-crossed through the lines of marching infantry. Flashlight beams pierced the darkness. Battle chargers whinnied in the night.

The place was a high mountain range on the border between the provinces of Shaanxi and Gansu. It was in this desolate mountain region that the soldiers of the North-west Field Army began their trek towards the Great Wall.

Mountains, large and small, stretched rising and falling towards the horizon. There seemed to be no end to them.

Scaling one, the men found themselves confronted with another, as if it had suddenly sprung up from the level ground.

Beneath the beating sun, the men dripped perspiration. It ran from their heads down to their feet. They gasped for breath; their throats were parched; their legs were stiff and swollen. Shedding a drop of sweat for every step they took, the PLA soldiers struggled on.

By the afternoon of the third day, they seemed to be reaching an end both to mountains and to water. Low hills gradually replaced the high mountains. Rivers dwindled into little streams. You could almost see the trickle disappearing into the earth.

In these dry red hills a tree any thicker than a thumb was something rare. You could dig a hundred and fifty yards without striking water. All you brought up were ashes from the fires of ancient ancestors.

It was near the desert and water was scarce. What little water could be found, was brackish. One evening towards the end of June, the men camped in a small village on the edge of the desert. Wei Yi, the regimental chief of staff, at once sent out twenty mounted scouts to search for any water within a radius of seven miles.

First Battalion was luckier than the others. It camped in the lower end of the village, where there was a small spring. Twenty or thirty of its cooks and cooks' helpers lined up at the spring with cauldrons, canteens, buckets — anything that could hold water. With avid eyes they watched the pure thin stream. It meant life to thousands.

The battalion's First Company had to wait half the night before its cooks could draw water and prepare a meal. Some of the men were asleep before they even finished eating.

After the men had all retired, old Sun, chief of the cooks' squad of First Company, continued to boil water to purify it for drinking. Collecting the men's canteens, he filled them all, then ladled out two bowlsful for Dayong and instructor Chengde. The two were sleeping on the clay platform next to the stove. Evidently they had dozed off in the middle of a discussion, for a little oil lamp still flickered on the platform between them.

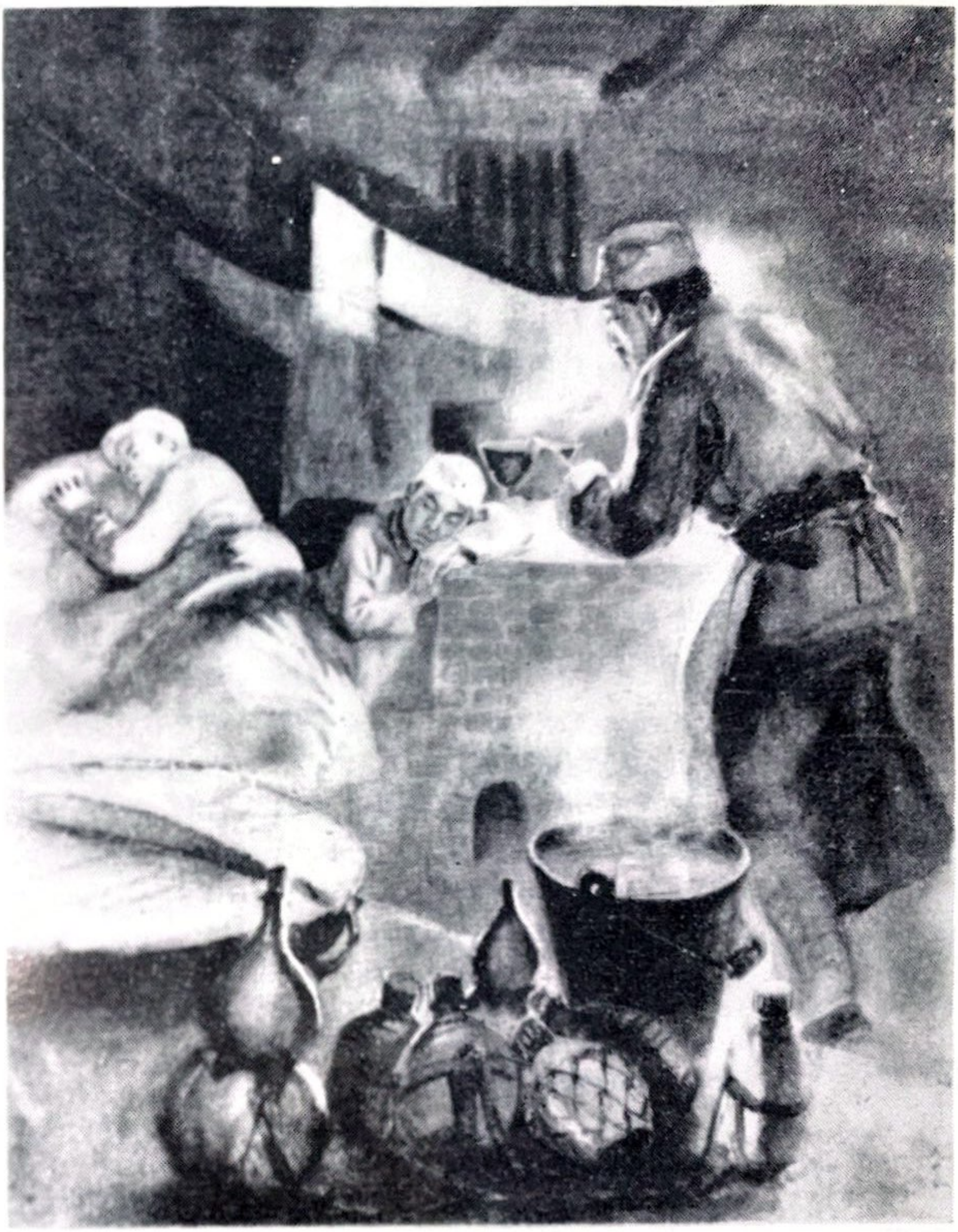
Old Sun hesitated whether to rouse them to drink the water. Bowls in hand, he leaned over and gazed at Dayong with fatherly affection. Then he put a bowl down beside the sleeping men and gently picked some bits of dried grass from Dayong's black hair. He wished he could wash it for him. But water was so scarce. There wasn't even enough for the company C.O. to drink. His eyes fell on the bowl in his hand. Making up his mind, he called to Dayong.

Dayong opened his eyes immediately. The first thing he saw was the bowl of water. He licked his dry and swollen lips. He could have drunk it down in one gulp. Taking the bowl from old Sun's hand, he said softly:

"Be quiet. Let the instructor get some rest. Leave him a little water to drink when he wakes up. I've already had some. Give my bowl to the two youngsters."

In the light of the lamp old Sun could see Little Cheng, the messenger, sleeping deeply, his head on the stomach of San Niu, the young medical orderly. San Niu was mumbling fretfully in his dreams. Little Cheng's lips moved. Was he dreaming of drinking water? Old Sun's heart ached. The kids must be terribly thirsty. He was torn between waking them for a drink and letting them sleep. But they'd get sick if they went without water too long. He determined to wake them.

He shook San Niu. No response. He held him in his arms. The boy slept even more soundly. Little Cheng made a murmuring assent when the old man called his name, then,



as old Sun continued to call him, he mumbled and threshed out with his arms and legs.

Dayong got up and walked outside to stretch his legs. It was much cooler, in fact he had to wrap his arms around his chest to ward off the cold. Strange. During the day you felt like you were being boiled in oil; at night it was cold enough to give you cramps. No wonder the local peasants said:

Mornings, wear your padded coat,
Thin cloth for your noon attire,
Eat a few cool water-melons,
Then be sure to make a fire!

Dayong made a tour of the guard posts and dropped in on the kitchen on his way back.

Old Sun sat beside the stove, sleeping soundly, his arms wrapped around his drawn-up knees. Firelight shone on his greasy uniform. He was wracked with chills, and he groaned softly in his sleep.

Kneeling beside him and resting one hand on old Sun's shoulder, Dayong put his head close to the old man's and listened to his uneven breathing. He gently stroked old Sun's gnarled hands, his swollen, scalded feet.

A chill shook the old man into wakefulness. He wiped his sweating face with his sleeve. Oh, how sternly the company commander was watching him.

"Is it time to start cooking?" he said, looking flurriedly about the room. "I fell asleep."

Dayong pressed down on his shoulder and wouldn't let him rise. The old man swallowed.

"You ought to get some sleep, commander," he said unhappily. "You and the political instructor are always so tired. . . . Busy, busy . . . it hurts me to see you."

"Let's talk about you, old Sun. You're in bad shape!"

"Ah, there's nothing wrong with me. A little thing like this ... what does it matter?"

The old man had been suffering from dysentery for the past five or six days, and Dayong knew it. Today, during the march, the old man had fainted. Dayong looked at his eyes, inflamed from lack of sleep, and his feet, so swollen that no shoes would fit him.

"You're an old veteran, old Sun. You know there's nothing you can't tell me. You're ill, but you haven't said a word. That won't do now, will it?"

"But commander, haven't you said we've got to grit our teeth? All the cooks in my section have swollen feet, and there's not one of them without some small ailment. As long as I hold out, they can hold out too. I'm a Communist, aren't I? I'm not much good at anything else, but at least I can keep plugging away when the going is tough."

Frowning, Dayong poked up the fire. He gazed at old Sun for a long time. "You take a good rest," he ordered. "We don't march until tomorrow at midnight. We have to prepare enough water to get us across the desert. That means you still have time to go to the infirmary. Take care of your health, old Sun. In difficult times like these, our veterans are the most precious things we've got."

"Commander, you hurry and get some rest," old Sun begged. "Look how tired you and the instructor are. It really hurts to see you."

5

THE painful march through the desert started.

For every step forward the men took, they slipped back

half a step, and their shoes became filled with sand. At night a big sandstorm arose. It blew so fiercely that the peasant guide — though he had lived all his life in these parts — lost his way. The march had to proceed by compass.

The second night of marching passed.

At daybreak the sun seemed to leap suddenly from the desert into the sky.

A limitless sea of yellow sand spread in every direction, its millions of tiny particles gleaming in the sunlight. There was only a haze where the horizon and the heavens should have met. The sky was like a huge bowl inverted over the sea of sand.

The column of marching men, like a meandering stream with no beginning and no end, trailed across the boundless yellow desert.

Although tired from marching a day and two nights, the PLA soldiers felt much better now that the stormy night was over.

Political workers and Communists up ahead shouted back encouragement:

"Help one another and we'll lick the desert!"

"Crossing the desert means victory!"

On both sides of the line, announcers hoarsely shouted the things to be noted during the day's march.

There wasn't the trace of a cloud in the sky at noon, and the sun shone with a terrible intensity. The sands of the desert were scorching; the air was burning hot, stifling. There was not a tree, not a breeze, anywhere. The men's lips were dry and cracked, their throats were afire, they were dizzy and their eyes were blurred. Many soldiers had nosebleeds. The metal barrels of their rifles were very hot, and they kept shifting them from one shoulder to the other.

The PLA soldiers trudged on with leaden feet.

Suddenly, there was a humming sound in the sky, and the men automatically looked around for shelter. But as far as the eye could see there was nothing but flat yellow desert.

Dayong spotted one plane, flying very slowly. Observation plane, he thought.

A little later, three enemy fighters appeared. They circled, then dived at the column in a strafing run. Thousands of flaming arrows struck on all sides of the PLA troops, kicking up small geysers of sand.

Dayong angrily yanked out his pistol. Instructor Chengde ran over and grabbed his arm.

"What are you trying to do? That's no damn use. The men are boiling mad as it is. You fire one shot and they'll waste all their ammunition shooting at the planes."

Furiously, Dayong shoved his pistol back into its holster. Patting the sand from his uniform, he walked along beside instructor Chengde. He was speechless with rage.

"What got into you just then?" the instructor asked him.

"The day I see some planes of our own in the sky — even one plane — I'll die happy."

"Don't be silly. We'll have planes pretty soon. I remember back in 1941 I was leading two hundred militiamen in an attack on a Japanese gun tower. We shot at it for two days and two nights, but couldn't make a dent in it. I thought to myself then — Will the day ever come when we have some nice mortars and good flat trajectory guns? Well, now we've got mountain guns and field artillery pieces, lots of them."

His mouth clamped tight, looking straight ahead, Dayong marched on without a word.

"What are you thinking about, Dayong?" asked Chengde. "Are you still sore?"

Dayong shook his head. "We sure have our problems. Some day we'll have modern equipment and I'll learn how to use it if it cracks my skull."

In the distance a great yellow cloud came rolling in their direction like the crest of a huge flood. "Maybe it will cool things off," the men thought. They pulled their caps down tight, so that the peaks shielded their eyes, and waited.

The yellow cloud soon engulfed them, blotting out everything. The sun became a blur in the sky. Far from being any cooler, the men felt as if they had jumped out of the frying pan into the fire. For this was the "hot wind" of the desert. Gasping for breath, the flying particles of sand stinging their faces painfully, the men shut their eyes and bent their heads into the wind, their clothes flapping and billowing. Everyone stood stock-still, as if afraid that if they moved one foot the wind would lift them up and blow them away.

After the hot wind had passed, the sun burned hotter than ever. Heat, thirst, exhaustion tormented the men.

A soldier ran up to Dayong. "Old Sun has passed out."

Dayong hastened towards the rear of the column, Little Cheng, the messenger, running behind him. Sweat ripped from Dayong's brick-red face. His clothing was drenched with perspiration, as wet as if he had just climbed out of the river.

One of the cooks was kneeling on the ground, holding old Sun in his arms.

Dayong knelt down and hugged old Sun to his chest. The cook stood up.

"Commander, old Sun — old Sun is in a bad way."

"You'd better go help the political instructor. See, there he is, over there, supporting that man."

The cook looked at old Sun a long time, then left reluctantly.

Eyes staring, lips cracked, the old man was red in the face, and purple veins bulged in his neck. His lips moved as if he wanted to speak, but no sound came out. Soon his breathing grew weaker; the colour faded from his face.

Dayong held him tight. Very shaken, he kept muttering, "If there was only a mouthful of water to give him . . . only one."

"Only a mouthful of water," Little Cheng, the messenger, echoed mechanically.

Yes, one swallow of water could save a life.

The three enemy planes again dived and strafed. Bullets hitting on all sides spattered sand in the faces of Dayong and old Sun. Dayong shielded the old man with his body. He glared at the planes with a hatred that threatened to burst his heart. His body shook and his lips trembled with fury.

The leader of the regimental medical corps came galloping up. Leaping from his horse, he cried, "I can save him, I can save him. This injection will do the trick." He tried to jab the needle into old Sun's arm, but it was impossible. The old man was already dead; his limbs were stiffening.

Dayong gently laid old Sun down and stood up. He tore a tattered sleeve from his shirt, intending to cover the old man's face and keep the sand out of his eyes. Stupefied with grief, stood numbly with the cloth in his hand.

Old Sun, old Sun! When the other comrades marched, you marched. When the other comrades slept, you prepared food. How many times did you tighten your belt so that they could eat their fill? With a cauldron on your back, you marched in the ranks, through wind and rain, day and night, year after year. You never complained, never gave a thought to yourself.

Little Cheng looked through the old man's pockets to see whether there was anything that could be sent to his home. He found a small box and a small notebook. The box contained needle and thread, some bits of cloth, a pencil stub and a schedule of merit points for the cook squad. The notebook had an oilcloth cover to protect its paper-binding from the rain and damp. Every page bore old Sun's black fingerprints. And on every page there was only one inscription, scrawled large in an unsteady hand — Chairman Mao.

Old Sun was illiterate, but he had seen comrades writing letters to Chairman Mao, and he decided to write one too and tell all the things that were in his heart. And so, he began learning to write. When the company made camp and while his cauldron was cooking over the fire, the elderly veteran would laboriously practise writing in his small notebook. At night, after a hard day's march, what hopes were embodied in those words he scrawled.

Dayong put the notebook in his pocket. He would find some means of getting it to Chairman Mao, he vowed to himself.

The column never stopped marching by. Soldiers, stretcher bearers. The march old Sun had not been able to finish, the comrades were going to complete. They gazed respectfully at their fallen comrade. Not a sigh did they utter; their faces showed no sign of grief. But the atmosphere was solemn, stern.

Dayong and Little Cheng buried the old man in the yellow sand. Dayong whittled a board from an ammunition crate into a rough headstone, on which he wrote:

Here lies Sun Quanbou, Communist,
57 years of age,
A native of Xiaoyi County, Shanxi Province.
He gloriously gave his life
For the liberation of
The people of China.

Placing the board at the head of old Sun's grave, Dayong stared at it a long time. Then he wiped the sweat from his forehead and slung the old man's cauldron over his back.

On, on, the men hurried across the sandy wastes. The eyes, ears, mouths of their sun-blackened faces were filled with sand. Their feet were heavy as lead. But they held their heads and chests high and moved forward at a rapid pace. Far off, they could see a whirling pillar of sand twisting into the sky. Let it come, be it tornado or mountain-levelling cyclone.

Dayong caught up with his company. After delivering a soldier who had fainted to the medics, instructor Chengde also came back. The two walked side by side. Dayong opened his shirt and rolled his one sleeve up to the elbows. Hands on hips, ration bag resting on his shoulders, Dayong moved forward with large strides. He had about him the same air he wore each time the company got ready to launch an assault. He looked at the instructor as if wanting to say something, but he didn't speak.

The sun was scorching hot. Thirst, thirst, maddening thirst. The men no longer had any feeling in their mouths. Their hearts beat fast, but their circulation became more and more sluggish. Veins in their hands and necks stood out thick and purple. Every step required the utmost will-power, but no one could rest, no one dared to rest. The man who sat down might never be able to rise again.

The column increased its pace. The men stared ahead, longing for the sight of a village, a town, human habitation. During previous marches they had always taken these for granted, and paid little attention to them. Now, any dark mass on the horizon thrilled and excited the PLA man. But each time they drew near, it turned out to be a thicket of brambles. What a disappointment! Gradually the men stopped looking. They just kept slogging forward, head down. There must be an end to this wretched desert. Sooner or later they'd walk their way out of it.

6

AFTER striking another blow at Hu Zongnan's crony, Ma Hongkui, and retaking the Sanbian Region, the North-west Field Army rested for a short period near the Great Wall, and reorganized and trained its forces.

Brigade headquarters called a meeting of officers of battalion rank and above at which this programme was announced. It was nine o'clock at night before all the details were worked out and the meeting broke up.

Brigadier Chen, deep in thought, paced the floor of his room.

The tensions and hardships of endless battles made tremendous demands on the energies of the revolutionary fighters. During a battle, Chen could go for days without sleep. He could stand studying a map for hours. Now that the army was resting and reorganizing, military life appeared to be much quieter than usual. Actually, the problems confronting Chen and his officers were infinitely more complicated than those arising on a march or in battle.

The brigadier seemed to exude strength; his eyes flashed. A bristling black beard covered his face, for he hadn't shaved in half a month.

Some middle-aged people, in spite of the trials they have endured, retain many of the characteristics and tastes of their youth, though it is hard to put your finger on them. Chen's actions — direct, bold, cheerful, firm — were still those of the man he was back in 1931, when he was a company leader in the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army.

Yang Kewen, the brigade's political commissar, reclined on a blanket spread upon the floor. Beside his head was an enamel cup in which a wick, floating in oil, gave off an uneven flame. Yang was reading a pamphlet by Chairman Mao: *Strategic Problems for China's Revolutionary War.*

Two staff officers and a member of the Education Section of the Political Department were copying some material at a table in a corner of the room. Chen walked over to them occasionally and observed their rapidly moving pens.

Sitting up and casting an intelligent glance at the brigadier, Yang rolled up the paper-bound book and tapped it against his knee.

"I've read this pamphlet of Chairman Mao's dozens of times in the past few years, but today it's like reading it for the first time. Every word of it seems especially personal and precious."

"It only goes to show how difficult it is for a man to grasp a simple truth, to really and truly understand it," said Chen. "Not just things you've never experienced, either. Even things you've given your heart's blood to learn — you've got to go over them time and again in your mind before they really can be called something you really understand. Maybe I'm being too empirical, but it seems to me that a man progresses according to his experiences."

"Right," cried Yang, sharply slapping his knee. "Old Chen —"

The brigadier cut him short with a wave of his hand. "Look," he said, "the youngsters have fallen asleep."

"The younger you are, the better you sleep. When I was a machine-gunner, I could doze off the minute my head touched the ground."

Walking over softly, Chen covered one of the sleeping young staff officers with his own cotton-padded coat. The young fellow awoke.

"I'm not sleepy, brigadier," he said, embarrassed. "But you'd better get some rest."

Chen laughed. He tapped a cigarette end on the table. "Don't kid me. Not sleepy — you were snoring away."

A night wind, blowing in from the desert, flung sand against the paper windows. Camel bells could be heard tinkling in the distance. Next door, a peasant's child awoke and cried. Its mother's gentle crooning gradually soothed it back to sleep.

Chen checked the material the young staff officers had written, weighing and correcting each sentence. He referred to a book among the volumes at the head of his bed. These included some of the works of Marx, Lenin and Chairman Mao, a copy of *Suvoroff*, two war novels, and five or six foreign romances.

The brigadier was absorbed in his reading. At times he laughed aloud — and his laughter was pure and gay, like that of a young man without a care in the world.

Commissar Yang put his book aside and stretched out on his pallet with his hands behind his head, immersed in thought. After a while, he said:

"I had a chat with Dayong this afternoon. It's funny. Whenever I see him, he reminds me of myself when I just joined the army."

"Dayong always does his best to avoid me," said the brigadier. "As soon as I find some time I must get hold of him and tick him off."

"You're too strict with him."

"That's because I like him."

The tinkling camel bells slowly faded away. In the stillness of the night, their monotonous sound rifting across the endless waves of the desert brought a feeling of great distance and tranquillity.

Chen listened a long time in silence. "Camels are rare in the south where I come from," he said. "When I was small, one was exhibited in our neighbourhood. I travelled nearly twenty miles to see it. My family was worried stiff when they couldn't find me. Silly, wasn't it?" He slowly tapped the ash from his cigarette. "Those camel bells certainly take me back!"

Reclining against the wall, through half-closed eyes Chen watched the thin line of smoke rising from the cigarette held between his fingers. His mind wandered far back into his past.

His life had been complicated, yet simple. Complicated because, like millions of other revolutionary fighters, he had gone through many arduous, bitter and intricate struggles. Simple because, like every one of the ordinary Chinese working people, hunger, pain and misfortune had dogged him like a shadow from the day he was born.

He had come into the world 37 years before, the son of a poverty-stricken peasant family in the province of Hunan. His father was a hired hand. Even as a child, Chen worked too, bearing as heavy a burden as the average adult. He "worked like a horse but ate food only fit for pigs," as the old saying goes. Poverty was a constant torment, and it ground him down to a hard, stubborn core.

And because his character was so unyielding, in 1930 he ran away from home and joined the Red Army.

After supper the following evening, the regiment's C.O. and its commissar, Zhao Jin and Li Cheng, were walking towards brigade headquarters. They crossed a meadow, leaped a stream, and soon approached their destination. From the brigade compound came the strains of a militant song:

Arise, all ye who refuse to be slaves,
With our flesh and blood
Let us build our new Great Wall! . . .

"Isn't that the brigadier singing?" asked Li Cheng.

As they entered the door Zhao Jin called out drily, "I'm afraid you haven't much of a voice, brigadier!"

"I wouldn't have to sing behind closed doors if I had." replied Chen cheerily.

The regimental C.O. chuckled.

"We're holding a meeting of our regiment's Party committee tomorrow morning at ten," said Li Cheng. "We hope you and brigade commissar Yang will attend."

"You mean you haven't announced the news of our big counter-attack on the Central Plains yet?" asked Chen.

"We announced it long ago," Zhao Jin replied. "Tomorrow's meeting is to sum up our methods of transmitting news from higher up, and to announce the new training programme."

"Were the men happy to hear about us entering the counter-offensive stage?" Chen queried. "When I first heard the news, I couldn't sleep all night." He looked at a map of the Central Plains, hanging on the wall. "You must explain to the men that this action marks the beginning of a great turning point in China's revolutionary war. It's an event of major historic significance."

The commanders chatted for a while, then Chen walked to the window and gazed out. The sun had nearly set. Soldiers who had been practising in the fields were marching back to the little village, in formation.

The oasis was a most pleasing place to the eye. Green grass spread like a carpet and ripe wheat emitted a pleasant fragrance. A line of camels seemed to float across the desert sands. Shepherds, driving their herds and flocks, raised their voices in song:

Everyone says Sanbian has three treasures,
Animals, salt and sweet licorice grass. . . .

7

AFTER the desert had gulped down the sun, a cool breeze arose and pale-blue smoke curled from the chimneys of the peasants' homes. Women poured the water with which they had washed the cauldrons into the pig troughs. Peasants sat puffing their pipes beneath the trees, resting after a hard day's labour.

Soldiers seated on the stone slabs outside the doors of peasant compounds, cleaned their rifles or wrote letters resting the paper against their knees. Some ripped old clothing into strips to serve as thongs for straw sandals. Others helped the peasants draw water, or mill grain, or carry fertilizer. Song and laughter filled the air.

Clad in a shirt and a pair of shorts, Jinshan was helping a peasant bring fertilizer to his fields. Recently he had begun to acquire some of that boundless cheer typical of the PLA fighter. His chest seemed to expand, the dark shadows were disappearing from his life, he was surrounded with brightness and joy. He had a growing desire to do more every day.

His brother Erzi came running towards him, his face red and flushed. Halting in the shade of a tree, Erzi shouted:

"Come here, brother, quick."

Jinshan put down his carrying pole and frowned. "What's the hurry?" he growled, but in fact his heart was light. Erzi had grown into a fine young man.

The day Erzi joined the PLA he discovered a remarkable thing. Because people had always treated him as something less than human, he had learned to consider himself a kind of inferior being. Like countless generations before him, he had known little but hardship and exhaustion. He supposed that he too would one day die of back-breaking toil and his body, scorned and ignored, would sink into the dust. But his first day in the PLA, Erzi found that he was a man, and this discovery made him thoughtful and sent strength surging through him. In the east Gansu campaign he distinguished himself and was cited for a big merit.

The brothers stood side by side beneath a tree.

"I don't know where to start," Erzi said awkwardly. Then he blurted, "Brother, I want to join the Communist Party."

Jinshan expelled a long breath and looked pained. Erzi was facing him, scanning his expression. Jinshan pushed him back a step.

"So you're going to join the Party?" he said in a strained voice. "That's fine, fine. Have you applied yet?"

Erzi had been burning with enthusiasm, but his brother's manner was like a dash of cold water. Jinshan's unconscious push had shaken Erzi to the core. He felt the gulf between him and Jinshan widening.

"Yes, I applied," he answered hesitantly. "And two Party comrades spoke to me. They said I made a good showing in the last two battles. When a Party group talked about my application, I was allowed to sit in."

Jinshan grasped his younger brother's arms. "Did the group approve?"

Erzi winced under the force of the grip. He controlled his anger with an effort.

"No."

"Why not? Why?"

Erzi thought his brother's concern was a sham. He kicked a clod of earth, ran forward a few paces and booted a stone as big as his fist and sent it rolling ten feet.

"No one has to worry about the group not passing me. At the meeting the Party comrades said if I continue to make a good showing and improve my class consciousness a little more, I'll be able to join the Party. Now that I've found the right path at last, I'm going to stick to it even if it kills me. From now on I know what I have to do." Erzi ripped off his cap and mopped his brow with it.

Staring, his lips twitching, Jinshan took a step closer. To Erzi he looked frightening, repelling.

"If you don't like to hear about my joining the Party, forget it," Erzi said shortly. "Here's a letter from home."

Mechanically, Jinshan took the letter, but at first he didn't read it. For several minutes he stood stiffly, his chest expanded. Only then did he recover himself sufficiently to sit down beneath the tree and tear open the envelope. The big Chinese characters danced before his eyes. He couldn't concentrate. He had to force himself to read the letter several times before he could understand it.

The letter said that the year before last, Pa had moved the family across the Yellow River to the liberated areas. They had been given land, they had climbed out of their sea of bitterness. Pa had become the chairman of a peasants' association, Ma was doing women's welfare work in her spare time. Recently Pa had met a discharged army veteran, a former member of the Heroes Battalion of the North-west Field Army, who told him that Jinshan and Erzi were both in First Company. The family was overjoyed to learn of their whereabouts. Ma had cried. Everyone hoped they would write immediately.

It was several years since Jinshan had been tied up and dragged off to be a soldier in the KMT army but, day and night, he never had stopped thinking of his family. Yet now that he actually heard from them again, he was not nearly as happy as he had thought he would be.

"They've settled down and they've got land," he said, looking at Erzi. "It's something our ancestors would never have dreamed possible."

"Of course it's fine they've been given land," replied Erzi. "But it would never have happened without the Communist Party. An important thing like that you haven't even mentioned."

Jinshan's face drained of colour. "Erzi, don't even you know how I feel? I've suffered more than you; I've taken a lot more missteps. Erzi, I'm no good. After all Pa and Ma went through to bring me up . . . how they hoped I'd take the right road . . . but I — I've disgraced myself."

In an abrupt motion Jinshan squatted down on his heels and grasped his head in his hands. His shoulders shook with the violence of his weeping.

After a while, Jinshan felt a bit better. "Erzi," he said, "give this letter to the political instructor. Ask him to read it out to the company. Let the comrades hear how our family has come back to the land of the living."

Erzi was very uncomfortable. He had misunderstood his brother. After all, Jinshan had been in the world several more years than he — it was no wonder he had picked up more of the backward ideas of the old society. But he — Erzi — instead of being patient and helpful, had made a lot of cold remarks that stabbed his brother to the heart. A fine Communist! Erzi already thought of himself as a Party member.

Silently, the two brothers returned to the company compound. To cheer Jinshan up Erzi said, "The day before yesterday our political instructor told us that our big counter-offensive has begun. Our forces under General Liu and General Deng have already crossed the Yellow River south into Shandong. Doesn't Pa's letter say they're busy supporting the front? I bet that's the army he's talking about."

"Right, it must be," said Jinshan happily.

Observing his brother's flashing eyes, Erzi continued, "Our political instructor says our Shanxi forces are driving hard too. Chiang Kai-shek wants to move up reinforcements, but we've got Hu Zongnan tied down so that he can't shift a single soldier. Now I understand the importance of our victory at Sanbian. To tell you the truth, brother, I didn't really think about these things when we were crossing the desert."

"A fighter must always think about things like that. Then even if he died in the desert, he'd die willingly," said a slow voice.

Erzi looked in all directions but didn't see anyone. Jinshan walked around a haystack and found Tiger sitting beneath a tree, gazing up at the drifting clouds with feigned innocence, whistling softly under his breath.

Tiger laughed heartily on being discovered. "You brothers were having quite a talk," he said. Cloth shoes and clothing which he had just finished mending were lying on the ground beside him, and he was now writing letters.

Jinshan walked up to him. "Did you hear everything we said?" he asked. "You know, squad leader, when I first joined our army and used to hear Jiangguo chattering about everything south of heaven and north of the sea, I thought it very peculiar, and damned annoying, too. All I could see then were the petty trifles right under my own nose. Nothing seemed to have any zest. But now I always feel so, so. . . ."

Wang glanced at the pipe in his hand. "You always feel so happy, is that it? A good soldier is always in good spirits. If our forces win a victory in the North-east, he feels just as good as when his own unit wins one here in the North-west. When a man is decorated for heroism in Shandong, it's as if he himself had won the award. When the political instructor tells us about all the new factories being built in the Soviet Union, he's delighted. If anything goes wrong in the farthest corner of the world, it's the same to him as something that happens in his own home. He's just as concerned. Think it over and see if I'm not right."

Jinshan pondered. Tiger's words made a man feel good, but he had never experienced the emotions which Tiger described.

He looked at the clothing Tiger had been mending. Yes, they all belonged to the men of Squad One. Jinshan recalled that when he awoke last night to go to the latrine, he saw Tiger sewing a rent in the uniform of one of the soldiers. After Tiger had finished his careful stitching, he folded the uniform carefully and placed it beside the sleeping man. It seemed to Jinshan that people like Tiger Wang lived only for the sake of others.

A photograph of a woman and a letter were lying next to Tiger on the ground. Jinshan picked up the picture and read the inscription on the back: "Ren Dongmei."

"Is that the missus?" Jinshan asked.

Tiger Wang laughed. "She's not married yet, how can she be a missus?"

Erzi took the picture from Jinshan's hand and examined it. "This girl must be well over twenty. How come she's still not married?"

"The children born to a fighter also become fighters for the revolution. That's what Chiang Kai-shek fears the most, so he's using big American cannons to keep us apart. He won't let us get married. Of all the dirty tricks." Tiger grinned, wrinkles forming in the corners of his eyes.

While Tiger and the two brothers were chatting so amiably, in a grove off to the left of them three other persons were engrossed in a heated argument.

First Company's two "imps" — as the youngsters who performed some of the non-combat jobs in the People's Army were affectionately called — medical orderly San Niu and messenger Little Cheng were inseparable friends.

Little Cheng had been captured in the battle of Yangma River. He decided to join the PLA and was assigned to First Company. Although he had made some progress since then, the skinny, clever child still got himself into frequent trouble. He was the hardest person to manage in the entire company — even in his dreams he was for ever skipping and hopping about. The men nicknamed him "Monkey."

San Niu was different from Little Cheng. He liked to study, and he already had an aim in life. He virtually worshipped the company commander and the political instructor. He often thought how impressive he would be if he too could wear a Mauser slung across his back and lead over a hundred men into battle! San Niu diligently emulated the courage and wisdom of the C.O. and the instructor, imitating the way they spoke and the way they walked.

But Little Cheng never had any fixed ideas about anything. If you asked him who in the company he liked best and who he most disliked, he really was unable to say. He liked to try his hand at everything. But he lost interest in whatever he took up after two or three days. Sometimes he would study with San Niu, sometimes he would practise blowing the bugle. Or he might watch little birds chirping in the trees for hours, and wish that he could fly with them in the sky. Once he watched the cook slicing vegetables. Immediately he was all enthused. He insisted on practising with the large cleaver. This lasted only until he got careless and chopped a bit of flesh off one of his fingertips.

Another day, he observed the company barber in action and his hands began to itch. He decided to become a barber. The young imp was clever enough, and he had a lot of nerve. He had only been studying a couple of days when he boldly announced that he was ready to shave heads.

One day after the evening meal, Jiangguo, who had been chatting with some of the local peasants about the political situation, was returning to the company. Singing, he booted stones out of his path as he walked. When he met any kids on the road, he mischievously made an ugly face at them.

The sound of Jiangguo's singing preceded him into the compound where First Company was quartered. His booming voice could be heard for miles. Nearing the compound, he met medical orderly San Niu.

"You're really busy," said San Niu politely, "like a high-ranking commander."

"All day it's drilling, meetings. I have some free time in the evenings usually, but then I have to go out and explain the political situation to the peasants and help our men write letters. With all that exercise I can eat four extra pieces of steamed bread."

"You're boasting again. We've got other educated people in our company. Why do the men have to ask you to help them write?"

Jiangguo frowned and said in a confidential undertone, "San Niu, I need a haircut. But if I go back to company headquarters, I'll have to report, go to meetings, do this, attend to that. My hair's too long, San Niu. I'm so hot my nose bleeds. I salute you and beg for your assistance. Please ask the barber to bring his equipment to that little grove outside our compound. It's nice and cool there."

"The barber's busy kneading flour for the cook. He has no time," replied San Niu. "Why not let me call Little Cheng? He's an expert barber."

When Little Cheng heard that someone actually wanted him to cut hair, his heart leaped into his throat for joy. But he assumed a very pompous manner. Shoving both hands in his trouser pockets, he demanded impatiently, "Who is it? You know I'm very busy."

"Come off your high horse. Jiangguo is waiting for you to cut his hair. He's no ordinary fellow, I tell you. That man has done everything. And all our commanders praise him."

Jiangguo didn't like Little Cheng very much. He considered him a pest, a brash child. Conscious of his own years in the army, he never let Little Cheng forget that he was an old veteran. Now he scowled and assumed his most authoritative air.

"How is your technique?" he demanded. "I don't want any amateurs messing around with my head."

Little Cheng drew himself up with professional dignity. "Wait till you see my work. Shaving heads — there's nothing to it."

"You've nothing to worry about," said San Niu. "If he wrecks your head, we'll give you a new one."

Jiangguo glared. "So everything's a joke."

"Don't act so high and mighty," San Niu advised. "I had to do a lot of talking to convince him to find time for you. And you haven't even thanked me."

Rather dubiously, Jiangguo let Little Cheng wash his head, then seated himself on the stool.

Little Cheng took one look at Jiangguo's head and his heart went weak within him. What thick black, bristly hair. It was going to be a very complicated job. But Little Cheng was afraid that Jiangguo would notice his timidity, and his ambitious nature again came to the fore. Steeling himself, he began scraping away with the razor. At his very first stroke, Jiangguo set his teeth. As for Little Cheng, the more he shaved, the more nervous he became. After five minutes of ministrations from the boy's trembling hand, Jiangguo's head was a mass of gashes and blood was streaming down his face.

Finally, the soldier could stand no more. Pushing Little Cheng aside, he roared, "Who told you to practise on my head? You stupid blundering little monster."

San Niu, giggling, watched from the side-lines.

Sneaking little impostor. I've met plenty of people in my time, but I've never seen a fraud like you." Jiangguo's tongue grew sharper as he warmed to his subject.

Little Cheng blew up. He hopped to one side as if he had just got a faceful of sparks. "Who are you to puff out your beard and pop your eyes? Maybe you didn't send a formal invitation card but don't forget *you* asked *me* to come."

"Scram! Roll away!"

"I'm not standing in anybody's way. What are you going to do — eat me? I joined up to fight the revolution too — not to be pushed around by the likes of you."

After Jiangguo had stamped off, San Niu said to Little Cheng, "Don't drag this thing out with him. Jiangguo is a lot of thunder but not much rain. If you don't believe me, go and talk with him. I guarantee one friendly breath will blow all the clouds away."

"I don't want to have anything to do with him," Little Cheng retorted, and he walked belligerently away.

8

AT dusk, unit after unit assembled in the open fields. The North-west Field Army was about to set forth.

Where to? The men guessed they would march east along the Great Wall towards the banks of the Yellow River — a distance of about two hundred miles.

Local peasants from miles around came to see them off. Some forced steamed bread or tobacco into the soldiers' hands. Others gave parting advice — take care of your health, don't get careless on the march or in battle. Children wrapped their arms around the fighters' legs and refused to let them leave; the PLA men wiped the children's noses. An old lady, her head against Dayong's chest, wept.

"When will we meet again, son?"

There was an undefinable feeling in Dayong's heart. He had fought here; here he had buried the bodies of his fallen comrades; here he had helped the peasants cut and thresh their wheat. This old mama in whose ramshackle house he had been quartered had related to him the bitterness of her past as she mended his torn clothing. "When will we meet again?" Who knew? There were many days of wind and rain still ahead. The only things that mattered now were marching and fighting.

Holding the old lady's hand, Dayong said, "The next time we come this way, old mama, I'll be sure to look you up." The words sounded hollow to him even as he spoke, for he had said them every place he had been.

The men set out on another arduous march.

Marching three days, day and night, they left the desert behind them. To the east they could see a perceptible rise in the terrain. After another twenty miles, a large mountain reared up before them and blocked out half the sky. They had the feeling that if they climbed to its top, they could cut slices out of the blue firmament with their bayonets.

One more night they travelled on without a stop. At dawn they entered a valley. This valley was a hundred miles from east to west, and it led directly to the city of Suide and beyond that to the Yellow River.

The valley road was crowded with troops marching east. Peasant refugees watched them from ravines on either side of the road.

Enemy planes strafed continuously.

Zhao Jin rode his horse at the head of his regiment. Like all commanders, wherever he was, he swept the surrounding terrain with inquisitive eyes. On a mountain-top off to the right, he spied a number of military-looking men. They were walking slowly, and from time to time they used their binoculars.

The column entered a narrow pass, flanked on both sides by tall dark mountains. The sky seemed to have converged into a strip of blue ribbon.

Gradually, the valley widened again. The mountains grew smaller, and more and more villages began to appear.

Zhao Jin sat his horse very erect. Occasionally, he drew on the reins and twisted his body to look behind him. The men were singing, joking, telling yarns. An endless column of men, countless faces, warm enthusiasm, flashing eyes.

The sun balanced on the rim of the western mountains. The men were exhausted. Each of them thought: If only we could take a few minutes rest, how beautiful that would be.

It was strange. The road was jammed with infantry, cavalry, artillerymen, peasant refugees. The strafing enemy planes, the sound of rifle fire, the smell of powder — all were the usual forerunners of battle. But ahead of them the soldiers could see no masses of men, there were no whinnying horses — everything was quiet. Something unusual was going on up ahead.

"The enemy?" wondered the PLA fighters. No. In the first place there were no orders to "Double-time, march." or "Remove the gun covers." In the second place, the regimental commander and commissar had not been ordered to report to the higher command for consultation, nor had the staff officers gone to the side of the road to pore over the military maps. On the contrary, commissar Li Cheng was craning his neck to peer ahead, and Zhao Jin's face shone with an excitement he rarely revealed. They appeared to have some kind of premonition.

Ahead or behind, there seemed to be no end to the column. This huge flow of humanity was a complete entity in itself, a very sensitive entity. Every man was straining his eyes, listening intently. Even those a few dozen miles back, at the rear of the column, were doing the same. Could they actually tell what was about to happen up ahead? No, but they were infected by one of those moods that moved so quickly through a line of march.

"Chairman Mao!"

"Chairman Mao!" The words flickered like lightning from mouth to mouth, from heart to heart. In the flash of an eye, everyone in the long column knew.

An enormous pressure was mounting. At any moment the column would burst into cheers. But this was a time of battle, security measures had to be observed. The men couldn't shout "Long live Chaiman Mao!" but they could wave their fists and cry, "Long live . . . long live. . . ." A tremendous excitement shook the heavens, countless burning eyes strained forward, endless arms waved and shook like a forest of trees in a storm.

Dayong and his men were unable to see him. Chairman Mao and the Central Committee organizations had cut across in front of their regiment and gone on.

The soldiers excitedly marched forward, urging the men in front of them, "Hurry up, keep the ranks closed." As a matter of fact, none of the ranks were lagging. All were marching rapidly in close formation, rising on their toes, craning their necks to look ahead. They only wished they could fly.

Suddenly they observed that a mountain beyond was black with people. All the peasants in the neighbourhood had rushed to congregate there. The soldiers envied the local folk their point of vantage.

Dayong stamped with exasperation. "Chengde," he cried to the company's political instructor, "it's enough to drive a man to his grave. It's the same every time. If we're not too far ahead, we're too far behind. We never get to see Chairman Mao."

First Company's "imps" — San Niu and Little Cheng — were also nearly fretting themselves into a frenzy. Being short, all they could see in front of them were backs, all they could see behind were chests. They wanted to get out of ranks to the side, but they were squeezed so tight by the crowding soldiers they were unable to move an inch. The imps were ready to cry from sheer frustration.

"Long live . . . long live. . . ." The cheers rolled from the vanguard to the rear, from the rear back to the vanguard, shaking the heavens and the earth.

The men sang with all their might:

From the red east rises the sun,
There appears in China Mao Zedong. . . .

The song echoed thunderously among the mountains.

After another three or four miles had been covered, the singing gradually changed to ardent discussion. Everyone felt that even though he hadn't seen Chairman Mao, today Chairman Mao had been together with him on the march. To each soldier this was the most glorious, most unforgettable event of his life. The men were convinced too that this meeting with Chairman Mao was connected with some great impending battle. At the thought of this, they again began to sing.

Soaring and swooping birds skimmed across the sky. A cool breeze rustled through the sorghum and corn growing on the slopes and in the valleys.

9

ON August 1, 1947, the North-west Field Army set out from the Dali River valley west of the city of Suide, crossed the Wuding River, and began a forced march north towards the city of Yulin by the Great Wall.

On the march, the men talked excitedly of a speech General He Long had made at a mass meeting in the Dali River valley just before they left. General He Long was then commanding general of North-west Military Area. During battle, at times he shared command of the North-west Field Army with General Peng Dehuai, at times he commanded the local garrison units. He was also in charge of mobilizing the manpower and material resources of the provinces of Shanxi, Suiyuan, Shaanxi, Gansu and Ningxia to support the campaigns to liberate the northwest.

Zhao Jin and Li Cheng rode side by side at the head of their regiment. From time to time they glanced around at their men, talking animatedly behind them. The two commanders had also been talking about General He Long's speech.

"We've been told we're driving against Yulin and we've held our usual pre-battle rallies," said Zhao Jin, "but I've got the feeling that there's still a bit the higher command hasn't told us yet."

"I don't know about that," retorted Li Cheng. "I thought commissar Yang made it all very clear at that meeting of the brigade Party committee. Now that we've polished off Ma Hongkui and Ma Bufang in eastern Gansu and in the Sanbian Region, we're going after the enemy in Yulin. Once we've taken care of Hu Zongnan's allies, we'll be able to handle Hu more easily. Yulin is important because it's the 'anti-Communist stronghold' at the back door to the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region. Chiang Kai-shek and Hu Zongnan stake a lot on the place. After we surround Yulin, Hu Zongnan is sure to rush up a relief army. If we can pull his main force up there we'll be in a good position to wipe it out. That's called angling for a big fish with a long line."

"I think there's more to it than that," mused Zhao Jin. "General He Long coming specially to make a speech. . . ."

"What if he did? Hasn't he taken part in every one of our important campaigns?"

"Sure. But you know that the Central Committee has been staying in the Dali River valley. I hear they called a meeting a few days ago. Chairman Mao, Comrade Zhou Enlai, Comrade Ren Bishi, General Peng Dehuai and all the responsible comrades of the north-west region took part. My guess is that this Yulin campaign is part of some over-all plan involving the whole country."

"Maybe it's connected with an attack in the Central Plains. If not, then with our Shanxi forces preparing to cross the

Yellow River and drive towards Xian."

"It's hard to say. Our Shanxi army may have something else up its sleeve. Whatever it is, you can be sure it's something the enemy won't be expecting." His hand drew a big circle in the air. "Some strategic move."

After three days of marching through the mountains, the North-west Field Army approached the village of Sanchawan.

Sanchawan was an important post about seven miles south of Yulin and, in a sense, could be considered the rear entrance to the city. Surrounded on all sides by desert, it was held by an enemy regiment.

At dawn rifle and artillery fire around Sanchawan blended into a bedlam of noise. Chiang Kai-shek's American-made planes flew over to bomb our attacking troops.

All morning, the battle grew in intensity. Ammunition carriers and stretcher bearers kept hurrying towards the front. Sweating communications men unrolled and set up field telephone lines.

A large sand dune running from east to west was crowned with several big fortresses. Zhao Jin and his regiment were moving up towards the dune. Suddenly, they were enveloped in a whirling yellow sandstorm.

Rifles, artillery and enemy bombing joined in an inferno of sound. The yellow cloud of sand blotted out heaven and earth.

Intermittently appearing and vanishing in the sandy mist, the men of the regiment charged forward.

Dayong and his men, in conjunction with several other companies, destroyed four enemy fortresses in succession. One hundred and fifty yards from "Number Five," they were pinned down on the flat sandy wastes by intense enemy fire.

Our own artillery continued to give our attackers cover, but our gunners were blinded by the fierce yellow wind.

Some of our heavy machine-guns still fired; others were jammed with sand.

Lying in a hollow, Dayong raised himself slightly on his hands. His face was tight; his eyes bored straight ahead. He felt responsible for the outcome of this attack as well as for the lives of the men under his command. But they were pinned down by a murderous cross-fire, and the burden of his responsibility grew heavier by the minute.

Time was passing. The danger was increasing.

Dayong rolled over to instructor Chengde. For several seconds, the two men stared into each other's eyes.

"Our telephone line has been cut," said Dayong. "I sent a messenger to battalion asking them to move our covering fire further forward, but I haven't received any answer yet. What's wrong with them?"

Chengde pointed towards the left flank. "Look, Second Company still hasn't taken that fortress. The enemy's cross-fire has cut us off from contact with battalion."

Dayong and Chengde peered at both flanks and the position ahead. To the left, another company was attacking a neighbouring fortress; about a hundred yards to the right was a ravine from which came the sound of bugles and the yells of a charge.

Rivulets of sweat ran down Dayong's dusty face. Like all bold and experienced commanders, although anxious, he was quite clear in his mind. Coolly he sought out an enemy weak point. Suddenly, he thought of a plan.

"Chengde," he said, "let's send a squad with two machine-guns in a feint at the right flank to draw the enemy's fire. The rest of us will move straight up with the demolition charges. We'll 'give them a plane ride.' All right, you take the direct assault. I'll handle the right flank."

The political instructor pressed down hard on Dayong's back. "You lead the direct assault. I'll do the flank." Crouching, he raced off at top speed.

With two machine-guns, Chengde and his squad attacked the enemy from the side, drawing most of their attention and fire power.

Amid bursting shells, Dayong led his men forward through the swirling sand. Holding a packet of dynamite, Ma Changsheng, leader of the demolition team, said:

"Comrades, come with me."

Jiangguo leaped forward and grabbed the packet. "Let go. The first one belongs to me."

The two men struggled for possession of the dynamite, neither willing to yield.

Changsheng was the sort who grew incoherent when he became excited. Now he stamped and sputtered. "Jiangguo, you. . . ."

"Stop that wrangling," shouted Dayong. "Jiangguo, take the team and go." His tone was so severe that even the stubborn Changsheng didn't dare to protest.

Clutching the thirty-pound pack to his chest, Jiangguo turned to his men.

"Let's go."

The first man, the second, the third . . . a file of sturdy figures slipped forward through the fire and smoke and sand. The enemy fortress spat flame, exploding shells pushed black columns of smoke into the sky. The path of the demolition team was blocked so tight a drop of rain water couldn't have seeped through.

Fifty yards from the enemy fortress, Jiangguo was stunned by a bursting hand grenade. The packet one of his men was carrying exploded on being struck by a bullet. The two other PLA men were pinned down tight by enemy fire. They couldn't even raise their heads.

An icy hand gripped Dayong's heart. He wished he could tear the life force from his body and give it to those comrades under bombardment. As he turned his head abruptly to summon the second demolition team, Changsheng threw himself forward. "Commander," he cried. His stubborn face was set in solemn resolve. He would wrest victory if it cost him his life.

Changsheng set off with the four fighters of the second demolition team. Their first dash brought them out beyond Jiangguo, who lay motionless on the ground. Like every soldier in the heat of battle, Changsheng, at the moment, had no place in his thoughts for sympathy for a fallen comrade. Ahead was fire and smoke and a hail of hand grenades, barbed-wire entanglements being blown sky high. Thirty yards from the first row of trenches outside the fortress, Changsheng stepped on a land mine and was bowled over.

"The team leader's been hurt," shouted one of the men.

Changsheng scrambled to his feet. "Like hell I have. Forward!" His whole body felt numb and his head whirled, but he was not conscious of any pain. He could hear nothing; he could remember nothing except — "Blow it." Turning to the man behind him, he snapped:

"Blow it!"

With all the strength at his command Changsheng pushed towards the enemy fortress, but the two men behind him did not come up. They would never come up.

A rain of grenades bursting all around him tore his uniform to tatters. He fastened the dynamite packet to the wall of the fortress, pulled the detonator and rolled away. There was a blinding flash and a loud explosion and smoke plummeted into the sky. A large section of the fortress crumpled into rubble.

"No good, no good," Changsheng said to himself. "It still needs one more packet." His eyes flashed fire. His body was covered with dust and broken bits of masonry. He was enveloped in smoke. He didn't care whether he lived or died; only one thought possessed him: "One more packet of dynamite, one more packet."

Suddenly a man shot out of the smoke and flame. Crouching and holding a demolition pack, the man rushed forward like a whirlwind, placed the pack against the fortress wall, pulled the detonator and rolled — rolled right on top of Changsheng. It was Jiangguo. Changsheng threw his arms around him — the dearest comrade in the world — and was just about to shout something, when there was a deafening explosion. Then everything went dark.

Raising his Mauser, Dayong swung his left arm vigorously forward. "Charge!" He leaped to his feet and virtually flew towards the fortress. His agile body was like an unconquerable flag. The men rushed behind it.

The enemy abandoned their tall fortresses and fled pell-mell towards the rear. Dayong knew that they had lost all their fighting power. He led his men in a fierce pursuit.

10

WORKING in close co-ordination, the PLA units drove enemy forces back from the fortresses on the dunes into the village of Sanchawan. We attacked strongly from all sides and, in less than half an hour, put an end to enemy resistance.

Zhao Jin walked down a dune, beating the sand from his uniform with his leather belt. Behind him, Li Cheng was shouting orders to the men mopping up.

Dayong, the political instructor and the men of First Company were leading eighty or ninety enemy soldiers from the field of battle.

Instructor Chengde pointed at a demolished fortress still billowing smoke on a dune. "That one took a bit of doing," he said to the regimental C.O.

"It was mostly the work of Jiangguo and Changsheng," Dayong added.

Standing off to one side, Changsheng concentrated on puffing his cigarette. Jiangguo was exhausted and his face was covered with grime, but he still was able to grin.

As Zhao Jin gazed at the fortress, medical orderly San Niu came by with a stretcher team.

"Who is it?" asked Zhao Jin.

"Battalion Commander Liu."

They all hurried over to the stretcher. Li Cheng leaned close. "Liu, are you hurt bad?"

The battalion commander's face was waxen and his eyes were closed. He did not speak.

Zhao Jin felt his hands. They were cold as ice.

To comfort the commanders, San Niu said, "The chief of the medics says the bullet has gone through his lung, but his life probably isn't in any danger."

Zhao Jin clasped his hands behind his back. Shaken by a strong emotion, he said nothing and asked nothing. His face was calm, determined, stern, but his eyes flashed with a fire that was frightening in its intensity.

They descended the dune. First Battalion had suffered the heaviest casualties since it had been the driving wedge of the assault. Li Cheng, therefore, did not return to regiment with Zhao Jin, but went directly to First Battalion.

In the compound where the battalion was quartered he met the personnel officer of the regiment's political department. "The political instructor of Second Company has been wounded," said the personnel officer. "I've talked it over with Zhang Pei, their battalion's political instructor. We want to send Liu Yong from our personnel section to temporarily replace the wounded man. Is that all right?"

"Right. When you go back, report it to brigade Party committee. Where's chief Yang?"

"Over there, talking with Zhang Pei."

Li Cheng went up to Yang, chief of the political department of the regiment, and said, "We're moving again in an hour, to continue the battle. The political department men have to get right down to every company and help them with reorganization and replacement."

"We're not exactly idle," replied Yang. "Each of our men is trying to do the work of ten. The security section has taken charge of the prisoners, the civilian affairs section is combing the battlefield for salvageable equipment, the education section men are all down at Second Battalion and all of the personnel section have gone to First Battalion."

"What about Third Battalion?"

"I'm taking charge of that myself. Brigade has also sent five officers from their political department to help out." With a wave of his hand, Yang hurried off.

Zhang Pei, political instructor of First Battalion, had been standing quietly to one side, listening to the exchange that just ended. His left hand was bandaged. Three of his fingers had been blown off. From time to time his eyebrows twisted with pain, and perspiration stood out in the corners of his mouth and on the tip of his nose. The old saw has it that "The ten fingers connect with the heart." No doubt the wound on his hand hurt him grievously.

"Liu has been put out of action. You've been wounded too," said Li Cheng harshly. "The job of running your battalion. . . ." His head tilted slightly, his eyes fixed on the compound wall, Li Cheng pondered.

Zhang Pei looked at him. As always, the eyes of the political instructor were friendly, modest. He swung one foot slowly back and forth.

"Let me take over the whole job. I'll do whatever has to be done. My wound doesn't amount to much." Zhang Pei smiled, as if he were comforting the commissar. An agonizing pain stabbed through his hand, and he turned his head to conceal his expression of suffering.

Because he was beset with problems and physically worn out, Li Cheng was in a foul temper — like any man who has just been through a fierce battle. His face was grim and he didn't feel like talking. He glanced at the pale Zhang Pei, then nodded sharply.

"We'll be setting out very soon. Call a meeting of the battalion Party committee immediately. I'll be back in fifteen minutes to take part."

Li Cheng walked away, head lowered, deep in thought. He had had no rest since the night before. His throat was dry and his nose felt ready to spurt flame.

After sending a messenger off to summon members of the battalion's Party committee to the meeting, Zhang Pei sent for Dayong. He directed him to deliver to regimental H.Q. personally the important documents and telegraph copies which First Company had captured.

Regiment was only fifty yards from battalion, and Dayong covered the distance in no time.

The compound housing regimental command was a beehive of activity. It was jammed with men making an inventory of captured weapons. Here shouts, there commands — the atmosphere was one of great excitement. In a corner of the compound dejected-looking prisoners sat in bunches.

Entering the house, Dayong found only Wei Yi, regimental chief of staff, sitting cross-legged on the brick oven-bed, sleeves rolled up above the elbow, yelling instructions to his staff officers. The telephone beside him rang incessantly. He would pick it up, say a few words, and put it down again. His forehead was beaded with perspiration but he seemed quite unruffled, and went about his work with competent vigour.

A staff officer put his head in the window. "That enemy regimental commander we caught is here, chief. You want to question him?" He had to shout "Report!" three times before Wei Yi finally heard him.

"After a while," Wei Yi replied. "I can't get around to it now." He went on writing his report.

Dayong wanted to hand over his material, but he couldn't attract Wei Yi's attention.

Another staff officer came in and announced, "Chief, one officer of battalion rank has been wounded. Company rank —"

Wei Yi cut him short with a wave of the hand. "Tell me later. First get those weapons counted."

"The assistant political instructor of Company Six, Comrade Wei Gang, has been killed. . . ."

"Wei Gang?" Dayong cried hastily. "No!"

The staff officer had formerly worked together with Wei Gang in brigade headquarters, and they were close friends. He felt very badly.

Wei Yi seemed unaware of him. He continued writing his report, from time to time shouting instructions through the window to the men in the compound.

Suddenly, the message sank in. Wei Yi's nostrils twitched, and he raised his head. His face was like cast bronze, emotionless. His dull eyes at last came round to the young staff officer. Wei Yi's lips moved mechanically, but no sound

came out. "He's dead?" he seemed to be saying. "Impossible!"

His heart quivered, then again he bent over his report. He wrote for a minute, mechanically, producing only an unintelligible scrawl. He crossed it out and fixed his eyes on the corner of the room. There was the image of Wei Gang, gaily smiling before him. It was nonsense to say that Wei Gang was dead, pure imagination. He continued writing. Four or five minutes later, he again raised his head. The staff officer was still standing there. Wei Yi felt ready to burst with rage. But instead he went back to writing. His eyes never leaving the paper, Wei Yi said:

"Go. Do whatever has to be done. I can take the blow. One man falls, another moves up to take his place. He has fallen —" Wei Yi pounded his fist on the table and the ink bottle jumped. "What are you snivelling about? Wipe your eyes, comrade. You must. . . . Are there five hundred and six or five hundred and seven prisoners? Is that enemy colonel we captured called Zhang Xiaowu? You'd better get that prisoner figure straight. Brigade wants to know; they were on the phone again a minute ago."

Wei Yi cranked his field phone, spoke into it briefly, then shouted an order to the men in the courtyard. His voice was solemn, and it had a slight quaver.

Dayong was deeply moved. How he turned over his material to Wei Yi, he never did know. Leaving regimental H.Q., he could think of nothing but the busy chief of staff and the high-spirited Wei Gang.

At the river's edge he saw the regiment's chief of medics washing the blood from his hands while hotly criticizing one of the doctors. The doctor was defending himself vigorously.

Dayong heard them mention Wei Gang, and he stopped to listen. "What about Wei Gang?" he demanded quickly.

"The damnedest thing you ever heard," snorted the medical detachment chief. "Wei Gang was struck on the head by a bomb splinter. The wound wasn't serious, though he lost a lot of blood. What was bad was that the explosion buried him under a cave-in. When they dug him out, everyone said he was dead. Hmph! They couldn't convince me he was dead."

Startled and delighted, Dayong cried, "Then he's still alive? He's going to live?"

"Whether he'll live or die is hard to say. Anyhow it's still too early to put him on the list of dead — at least I sincerely hope so."

Chapter Four

At the Great Wall

1

ON the fifth of August 1947 the North-west Field Army reached the Yulin front. On the sixth at dawn it launched an attack along the entire line from Shenmu on the Tuwei River in the east to Polobao in the west where the Wuding River flows south through a gap in the Great Wall. In a day and night of fierce fighting the field army destroyed two regiments and two battalions of the enemy's regular army plus the local reactionary bands from four counties, then closed in on Yulin from every sector. The siege which followed lasted for two whole nights.

Our army always attacked at night. During the daylight hours our main forces withdrew, leaving only small units to hold those outskirts that had already been captured and to watch the enemy.

At dawn of the third day when our main forces were pulling back, Dayong's First Company was one of the units ordered to hold the line in the western suburbs of Yulin.

Dayong crawled to the top of a small hill and examined the surrounding terrain. Not far from him, willow trees had been stripped of their leaves by rifle fire. Birds which had nested in the trees during the night had been pierced by bullets and lay dead on the ground. Artillery shells had uprooted several big trees and flung them down. The previous night's battle had been intense.

When the sun emerged on the horizon, the enemy commenced a heavy barrage. Artillery shells ripped through the air with terrifying screams. They burst in great sheets of flame, churned earth showering from the sky, acrid smoke smarting and blinding.

Dayong rolled down the hill, crossed through the pall of smoke and jumped into a trench.

"Get your hand grenades ready, comrades," he shouted. "The enemy's going to charge."

Tensely, the fighters made their preparations.

But the attacking party was small and it was quickly thrown back.

Laying down one barrage after the next, the enemy launched a series of attacks, continuously, for six hours, but without the least effect.

That night the PLA again drove against Yulin. A storm of rifle and artillery fire fell on the city. KMT troops on the city walls yelled in alarm. They soaked wool and cotton bales and quilts with oil, ignited them and dropped them outside the walls. Yulin was surrounded by a ring of flames.

Dayong led the men of First Company, carrying scaling ladders, toward the city's big west gate. They had driven to within a hundred yards of the gate when a battalion messenger came crawling through the mud. He tugged Dayong by the shirt and said:

"Order from the battalion C.O.: Your company is to withdraw to where it started from."

Covered with mud, his throat parched, Dayong was enraged.

"What for?" he rasped.

"How do I know? Anyhow that's the battalion commander's order."

First Company pulled back toward its jumping-off point.

As Dayong crept through the mud, shells burst all around him. Earth, branches, stones, rained down on his back. Angrily, he gritted his teeth. The blood raced in his veins. His chest felt ready to burst.

"Withdraw," he muttered. "What the hell for?"

A few dark forms crept up beside Dayong.

"Company commander, why are we going back? We've got to take that place. We've just got to clean out that nest of traitors!" It was Quanyou's voice.

"We'll take Yulin or we'll die trying!" Jiangguo's belly was full of anger. Dayong pounded his fist on the ground.

"What are you bunching together for? Trying to make a target for a shell? We were ordered to withdraw and that's what we're going to do. Go back and look after your men."

The enemy kept sending up flares which hung in the sky like huge electric bulbs and brightly illuminated our positions outside the city. Taking advantage of the brilliant light, they bombarded us with every weapon in their arsenal. The fire of exploding shells streaked the heavens like lightning.

Dayong crept through a paddy field, leaped into a stream, crawled on the ground, jumped up and ran forward, crouching. Dashing a few dozen yards to the left, he bumped into Zhang Pei, the battalion's political instructor.

"I've just been looking for you," said Zhang Pei. "Come on."

His left hand swathed in bandages, the political instructor was unable to crawl. He bent forward at the waist and virtually flew through the rain of bullets. He splashed across a stream, leaped down an embankment and plunged into a hollow. His movements were so quick and agile, even Dayong had difficulty in keeping up with him.

The two men stretched prone, side by side in the hollow.

"Our army's pulling back," said Dayong. "Does that mean we're going to launch another attack right away?"

"This wretched place. The mud's enough to soak your belly to a pulp. Dayong, our field army's leaving Yulin."

Dayong drew a sharp breath. His back arched into a bow, as if he were gathering himself to spring.

"What," he cried. "The whole army leaving?"

Zhang Pei's hand lightly pressed down on Dayong's spine. "Don't get excited. Our whole army is pulling out. — Look at those damn flares. We've got to collect our wounded in a hurry. — The enemy is rushing up reinforcements. Their enlarged Thirty-sixth Division is marching on Yulin along both sides of the Great Wall as fast as it can travel. It's only ten miles from here right now. We're pulling out, immediately."

Dayong ground his teeth. "We've been fighting here day and night. We've had losses. You mean to say we're going to let them off so cheap?"

"Nothing cheap about it," Zhang Pei retorted. "We're leaving Yulin so that we can hit the enemy even harder."

Soldiers streamed past the two men towards the rear. Some carried heavy machine-guns; others bore trench mortars on their backs. They were followed by whinnying mules laden with dismantled mountain guns. The artillery units were withdrawing.

"The regimental C.O. has ordered our battalion to cover the retreat. Your company is to cover the battalion when the battalion pulls out. After you've finished the job, go to the Great Wall, a mile north of here. A mounted messenger will be waiting for you beneath a big tree. He'll

tell you where to go. Don't forget now — keep calm and look sharp as you fall back."

Dayong returned to his company and conferred with political instructor Chengde. They then issued instructions to their platoon and squad leaders.

In a little while, except for the small units covering the withdrawal, the entire North-west Field Army had vanished without a trace. It was as if it had flown off on one of the desert winds, or suddenly disappeared into the ground.

"Chengde," said Dayong, "it's nearly time for us to get out of here. We have seven wounded, two broken machine-guns and a trench mortar. You take the wounded and the damaged weapons and catch up with the army first. After we've buried our dead, we'll follow right behind you."

"Good. We'll move more smoothly that way."

Twenty minutes after the departure of the company instructor, Dayong and his men threw back an enemy attack, then marched north a mile to the place the battalion political instructor had indicated — the big tree near the Great Wall.

They could see the flames blazing outside the city walls of Yulin. The enemy was keeping up a heavy fire. Stray bullets whistled overhead.

There was no sign of the messenger from regiment. Then they heard a horse whinny and Dayong led his men in the direction of the sound. He turned on his flashlight. The messenger was lying stiffly on the ground, the reins wrapped around his arm, his rifle beside him. He had been killed by a stray bullet. An icy hand seemed to clutch Dayong's heart.

The men buried the messenger.

When he was together with the main forces, Dayong was calm even when the enemy came swarming toward him by the thousands. Now he felt cold all over. Where had the army gone to?

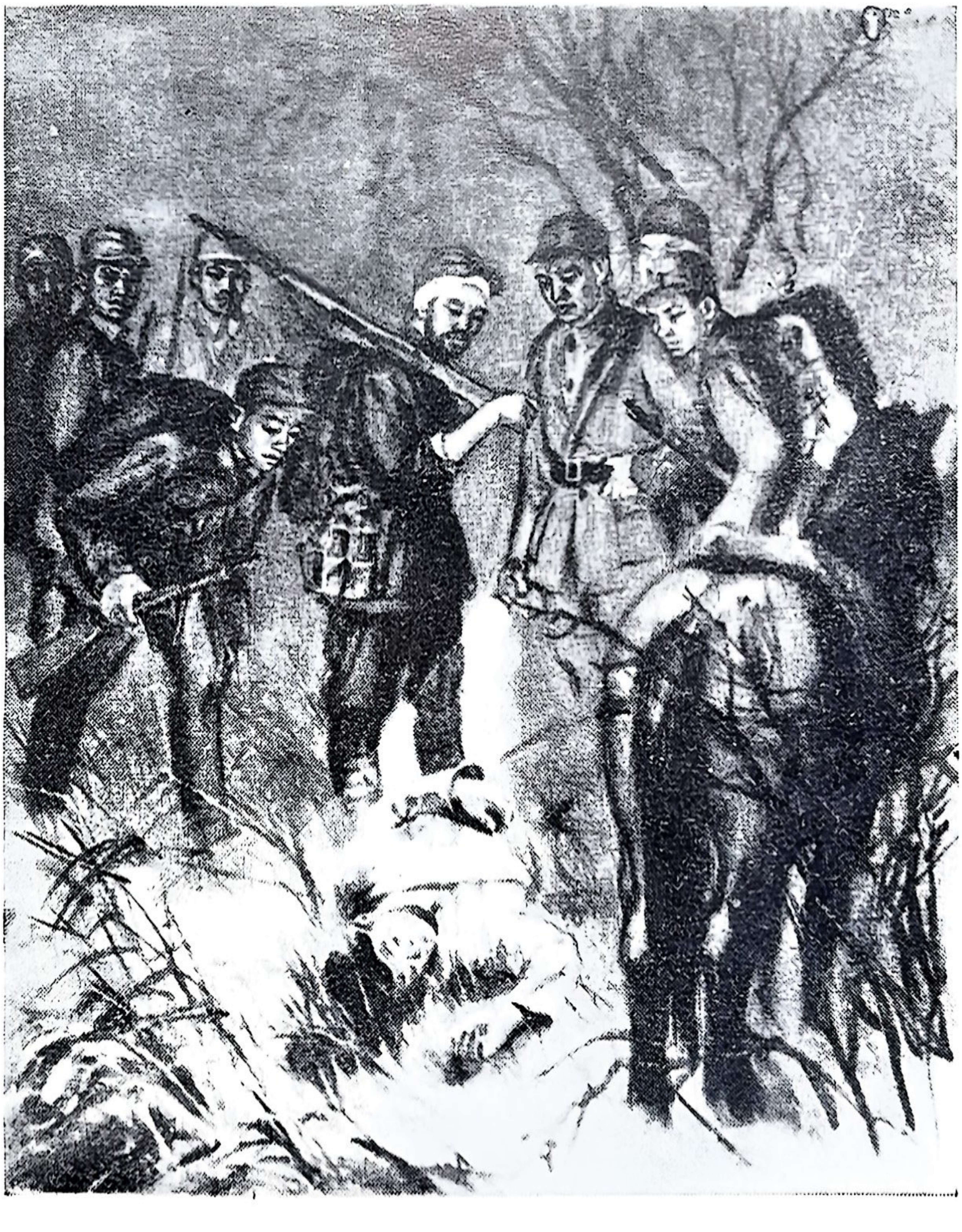
The earth and sky were black. It was so dark you couldn't see the tip of your nose. Alone by the Great Wall, buffeted by sandy gales — what were they to do? What direction should they take? Had the army withdrawn east along the Great Wall? Why should the army go that way? West along the Wall then? The enemy reinforcements were coming from the west. Perhaps our forces had gone to strike a blow at them. But when battalion instructor Zhang Pei had given Dayong his orders he hadn't said a word about attacking the reinforcements. Dayong was in a sweat. Who knew how many hardships and dangers lurked in the dark unfathomable night!

He sent a messenger out with the flashlight to search for some of the army's lime markers. No luck — the clean-up units had wiped out every one.

A wild wind sprang up from the desert, driving black clouds across the sky, stinging the faces of the men with sand. Lightning flashed, thunder rocked the heavens. Big drops of rain soon turned into a pouring deluge. Wind, lightning, thunder, rain raged together in a horrid uproar, enveloping the men with such force that they were unable to move a step. . . .

When the storm abated a bit, Dayong led his men northeast along the Great Wall. It was pitch dark. In order not to get lost, groups of three or four men held on to a strip of leg-wrapping. Others tied white handkerchiefs to their knapsacks to serve as markers for the men behind. By the time they had trudged three difficult miles, they were soaked to the skin and spattered all over with mud.

In the flickering lightning, the fighters could see a swath of black stretching before them — a grove of trees. Hey! The men were delighted. Trees usually enclosed a village, with



people and firesides. The company drew nearer. Sure enough, a hamlet lay within the grove.

2

DAYONG led the men towards the hamlet. If they continued wandering around in the dark stormy night, they might very easily lose their way and end up in the desert, or run into the enemy.

Dayong went ahead first with a few men to scout. The hamlet contained a few dozen ramshackle houses, all with their doors shut tight. Not a dog barked. There didn't seem to be a breath of life.

After stationing sentries outside the hamlet, Dayong brought his men in.

A dilapidated little temple stood in the north-west corner of the hamlet, and it was there that Dayong called a meeting of the company's Communist Party committee members, Tiger, Jiangguo, Changsheng, Quanyou and leader of Platoon Three.

Dayong wrung the water out of his trouser legs and cap. It was hard for him to speak, he was so upset. He couldn't figure it out. The army had fought for several days and nights. It had taken all the enemy strongpoints outside Yulin. Then, just when the city was going to fall, they were ordered to fall back. What was the sense of that? Suppose reinforcements were coming? Many's the time the PLA besieged a city and beat off enemy reinforcements at the same time. But no, we had to retreat!

Holding his rifle, Tiger stood in the rain outside the doorway of the little temple as though he enjoyed nothing better than a good drenching. Changsheng squatted in silence against the wall. With a leap Quanyou seated himself on a table and drummed his fist on its wooden top. Jiangguo alternated between toying with his flashlight and taking off his cap and putting it on again. He was very fidgety.

"Tiger," he said, "you've always got some tobacco on you. Give me just a speck, for the love of heaven. My throat's itching something fierce."

"Tobacco?" replied Tiger. "It's been soaked to a mush, along with everything else I own."

"I've never seen anyone die for want of a smoke," Quanyou said to Jiangguo. "You can get along without it for a while. Where did you pick up your fancy tastes anyway?"

"All right, all right, so I won't smoke."

"Jiangguo, nobody would ever mistake you for a dumb mute," said Changsheng. "Why don't you stop your squawking?"

Dayong reviewed in his mind everything Zhang Pei, the battalion instructor, had told him about the withdrawal. But he still didn't understand it.

"It doesn't look to me as if our army has gone to fight the enemy reinforcements," he announced finally.

The men were shocked. Quanyou leaped down from the table. Jiangguo squatted with angry abruptness. Even Tiger Wang, famed for his steadiness, took an involuntary step towards his company commander. Heavy-hearted, no one spoke, no one uttered a sound. It was as if they all had stopped breathing. Outside the wind howled dismally through the swishing rain. Black night wrapped everything in its tight embrace.

Then Dayong remembered the responsibilities of his position. If he, a leader, acted surly and resentful of orders, what would the men think? Taking a grip on himself, he said:

"Don't lose your heads, comrades."

"We don't attack Yulin, we don't fight the reinforcements," exploded Quanyou. "It's just . . . ah, what's the use." He stamped with exasperation.

"That's right," said Jiangguo. "Here we don't fight, there we don't fight. All we do is march, march, march."

Dayong put everything he had into making his words calm and firm.

"We all know our army's strategy. If our leaders say we're moving away to get into a better position to hit the enemy, we must believe it. Our company has to catch up with our main forces. Maybe we'll catch up quickly; maybe we'll have to wander around for quite a while first. Anyhow we can't only look at the bright side. We have to prepare for trouble. To make a long story short, comrades, we've got a thousand-catty burden on our shoulders." He thought a moment, then said deliberately: "We can't be scared just because we've lost contact with our army. As for me, I wouldn't care if the earth sank and the sky collapsed."

Jiangguo leaped to his feet. "Who said anything about being scared?" he demanded. "We've never given a snap for all the broken-down devils in the Kuomintang army. What if we have lost contact? There are plenty of roads around here. If we run into the enemy, we just bash them. The day will never dawn when Chiang Kai-shek's clowns can be a match for the likes of us!"

Quanyou stood like a rock, his hands on his hips. "I haven't seen any enemy soldiers with three heads and six arms," he remarked. "They're no supermen. What's there to be afraid of? Let's go. Strike!"

Holding his rifle, Tiger Wang paced to and fro on a short line. At times he patted a foot lightly in one of the puddles on the floor. He was neither as open and buoyant as Jiangguo, nor did he get red in the face with excitement like Changsheng.

"Jiangguo, Quanyou," he said, "hasn't this rain been able to damp down those fires you've got in your bellies? Our job is to tell every Party member to get all the men pulling together; come what may, we must catch up with our army. We've got to march and march and march some more. When we run into the enemy, if we can wipe them out, we'll wipe them out. If we can't wipe them out, then we pick up our feet and travel. We're not going to bite off more than we can swallow."

"The good thing is that there aren't many of us," said Dayong. "We're hard to spot. We can fight when we please and march when we please. But Tiger is right: We mustn't be rash, or we're liable to get our noses put out of joint. And I agree with Jiangguo and Quanyou on one thing: No matter how rough the going becomes — we'll get through. Comrades, we have to make it plain to the men that there was a good reason for our army's withdrawing. We fight only in those places we want to fight. Any time a battle isn't to our advantage we light out and lead the enemy on a merry chase through the mountains."

"It's up to us Party members to do a good job," said Tiger. "Li Yuming, that new soldier assigned to our company three days ago, hasn't let up with his crying and snivelling. We don't know whether he's scared or what. He won't say a word. You'd think he'd swallowed his tongue."

"Li Yuming?" said the leader of Platoon Three. "He's one of those who joined up from the border region militia. He's never been in any battles before. He's still a little timid."

The meeting concluded, Dayong and the others returned to the centre of the hamlet.

Thunder boomed and rolled. Rain fell heavier than ever, running from the men's heads down their necks, plastering their drenched clothes to their bodies. In the flashes of lightning Dayong could see the men, holding their rifles, in groups of four and five, sitting back to back in the mud. They were fast asleep. Squad and platoon leaders patrolled beside them; a few stood snoring with their backs against the wall.

A few minutes later Jiangguo came running up to Dayong. "Commander, there's hope," he shouted. "I've found an old peasant who served as a guide for our army. He's just come back."

After questioning the old man carefully and learning which direction the army took, Dayong gave the command:

"Fall in!"

The soldiers formed their ranks in the mud.

"Comrades, it's been hard sitting in this muddy soup," he said. "But we can't trouble the local people no matter how uncomfortable we get. We're going to march now. Anyone who's hungry can eat some of his flour ration. If you're thirsty, there's rain water at the sides of the road."

"Do we eat first?" a soldier asked.

"No. Eat on the march."

"Our flour's all turned to paste," said another soldier.

"That's easier to swallow than dry flour."

Dayong led the company tramping through the mud towards the south-east. After marching about two miles, they heard firing and, an instant later, galloping hoofbeats. At Dayong's order, the men stopped the horses as they came down the road. The riders turned out to be scouts of the "Fearless Division."

"What outfit are you from?" one of the scouts asked Dayong. "Oh, the Heroes' Division. Turn south and head for our liberated area, fast! The enemy's moving down this way. It'll be daylight in another hour. Comrade, we've got things to do. We have to be going."

The horses clattered off at a run towards the east.

From the north-west, accompanied by savage firing, enemy troops rolled down in a mad surge. What unit was this, Dayong wondered, that acted so fierce? It would be foolhardy to try and withstand them all with only one company. He led his men south-east, on the double. An enemy unit fanned out to surround them, yelling wildly, flinging hand grenades....

The sixty-odd men of the company fought a withdrawing action....

Although the company managed to break out of the encirclement, it had lost precious time. Near daybreak, the enemy was still hot on the company's tail, laying down a heavy artillery barrage to cut off its retreat.

"Come on, you bastards!" Dayong raged at the approaching enemy. "Even if you were all mouth, you couldn't eat any real man!"

3

THE battle situation was changing fast.

At dawn, Dayong and his men had no sooner beaten off an attack of the enemy's advance unit than they heard firing to their rear. They turned around to see tracer bullets streaming towards them. The enemy had knifed in only a hundred yards behind. They could see the KMT soldiers clearly.

The realization that they were cut off came to Dayong as a shock. He knew that the enemy was using this tactic to

paralyze their judgement and their will. His mind racing, he looked at the men. If a single one of them broke and ran, he'd be selling out his comrades' chances of victory. But not a man wavered. Hugging the ground, the men fired steadily. Dayong felt an invincible strength at his command.

The men were brave, but in a tight spot they needed a leader who could give cool orders in a clear determined voice. After leading the men to positions on higher ground, Dayong called out:

"I'm over here." He pointed at the ground beneath him as if to say, "And I'm here to stay."

"We'll fight it out from here. The time has come to prove your mettle."

Dayong's decisive tone called forth all the men's military skill, their sense of discipline, their hatred of the ruling-class oppressors.

"Pour it into them! Mow them down!" shouted the fighters.

Their bold cries stirred Dayong. Their courage further bolstered his own. He felt big, powerful. Pushing his cap to the back of his head and opening his tunic, he raised his pistol. He was like an iron image with blazing eyes.

Looking at him, the men were inspired.

Dayong and the fighters were consumed with hatred for the enemy. Their only thought was to keep pumping lead into their attackers.

Shortly before the sun emerged, three American-made enemy planes flew over. They bombed and strafed in wailing dives. The ground was like a bubbling cauldron, contracting and trembling beneath the fighters' chests. At times it tossed like a ship on a stormy sea.

Dayong ran to a large tree and swept his eyes across the surrounding terrain. There was at least a regiment of enemy soldiers in front of them; behind, over a battalion. Pistol in hand, he braved the heavy shellfire to inspect his platoons. The one under Changsheng, he ordered to remain with him. He instructed Jiangguo to take thirty men and occupy the high ground directly ahead. They were to hold off the enemy and not give an inch. He directed Tiger Wang to take two squads and cut a path through the enemy troops in the rear.

His left knee on the ground, holding his rifle in his left hand, Tiger leaned back and brought his right hand sweeping forward. "Come on!" he yelled to his squads. The men charged at the enemy.

Dayong ran to the highest point of the company's position. He found Jiangguo shouting orders, firing, standing like a big iron wall. Jiangguo's cotton-padded jacket was open; sweat poured down his brick-red face. No enemy could get off cheap in a clash with a man like Jiangguo, thought Dayong. He felt a contempt for their opponents.

"How's it going?" he asked.

Jiangguo's bold eyes gleamed straight at the enemy. Without turning his head, he replied:

"We're giving them a bellyful. We've knocked back two of their charges."

Rifle grenades exploded overhead in puffs of black smoke which changed in an instant to sheets of fire.

Dayong threw himself down and embraced the ground with both hands. Raising his head, he saw that Jiangguo had sent one squad under Quanyou out on the left flank, where it was holding a small temple. Two combat teams led by acting squad leader Yuming had occupied a piece of cemetery ground. Jiangguo deploys his men well, thought Dayong, but he shouted:

"What's the good of sticking around here, Jiangguo? How about a short fast jab at the enemy?"

Jiangguo savagely ripped off his cap and wiped his streaming face with it.

"We'll slug 'em the minute the chance comes."

The men had been concentrating on the enemy when the shouting back and forth between Dayong and Jiangguo brought to their attention the fact that their commander was with them. His presence gave them a great lift. They cast pleased glances at one another.

Dayong could see that they were covered with mud, their faces grimed by smoke. Blood and mud were mixed on the backs and shoulders of some, but none of them stopped firing.

Though a man's heart beats fast as he approaches a dangerous situation, when he is actually in the midst of it, all his thoughts become concentrated and simple. He doesn't consider whether he will live or die. So it was with Dayong and his men.

"Comrades," cried Dayong, "show them your style with your bayonets!"

"We'll take care of the enemy good and proper, commander!"

"We'll make them sorry they were ever born!"

After a heavy artillery barrage, between two and three hundred enemy troops came charging at Jiangguo's position. Jiangguo waited till the attackers were only forty yards away, then he yelled:

"Fire!"

The fighters flung their hand grenades and a curtain of smoke spurted heavenwards. Enemy soldiers rolled and crawled hastily away. Many remained motionless where they had fallen.

Before Jiangguo could climb out of his fox-hole, Dayong had already leaped forward, shouting at the top of his voice:

"Charge!"

Like a clap of thunder on a clear day, his cry shattered the enemy's nerve. But it galvanized the PLA fighters into action. They tore out of the trenches. In the smoke and dust, men shouted, bayonets flashed. . . . The dozen-odd men seemed to have the drive of thousands — all concentrated on that one small battlefield.

The enemy soldiers scattered in panic. Not even the machine-guns which their officers turned on them could halt their flight. . . .

Finally, they were rounded up again and, under the menace of their own machine-guns, thrown against Jiangguo's right flank. Two combat teams held off hundreds of the enemy.

"Take over here, commander," Jiangguo pleaded. "I'll take a squad to reinforce them!"

Dayong stopped him. "I'll go!" he said. Not giving Jiangguo any chance to argue, he signalled to a dozen fighters behind him.

"Come with me!"

Jinshan's face had suffered a bad scrape, but, brandishing a hand grenade, he clambered out of the trench with the rest. Seeing his waxen bloodless face, Dayong said:

"You can't go. Better rest a while."

"I came here to fight, commander!"

Dayong was going to order him to stay behind, but then he thought: It's only because of stubborn courage like Jinshan's that our few dozen men can fight off two thousand enemy troops. At a time like this when we're so few, who can rest? He let Jinshan come along.

By the time they reached the right flank, the enemy had already broken into the position. Yuming and his six or seven men were fighting hand to hand, their bayonets stabbing, slashing. . . .

Running up with his fighters, Dayong shouted:

"Communists, warriors of the revolution — charge!"

The sound of their commander's voice gave the defenders new strength. They quickly repulsed the enemy.

Five minutes later, the enemy began an artillery barrage. Shells burst, branches were snapped from the trees. Big boulders were shattered into fragments. A large tree was ripped up by the roots and flung to the ground. Earth, shell splinters, pieces of rock, rained down on the heads of the fighters.

But the enemy had been driven back and, for the moment at least, we were victorious. The defenders of the right flank greeted Dayong happily.

"Pretty dangerous then!" said one.

"Dangerous?" scoffed another. "We gave the danger back to the enemy on the points of our bayonets!"

Dayong loved to listen to the men's bold talk. He felt that he was nothing without them. With them, he could move mountains. His hands gripping the earthwork mound, Dayong peered intently at the enemy positions.

He walked through the shallow trench the fighters had dug. The men were boasting, joking, patching exercise books that had been damaged in the recent clash. One man was carefully repairing his fountain pen while relating its history to a companion and expounding on his own skill as penman. A number of soldiers were bickering over a precious cigarette butt.

"It's a nice long one. Every man should be able to get one drag out of it. No grabbing allowed."

"Comrades, the day I become manager of a big cigarette factory, you can all come and smoke all you want, free of charge."

"Good. We'll hold you to that. No going back on your word now."

The men's cheerful banter relaxed Dayong and steadied him. Our political commissar is right, he thought. The will-power of one proletarian fighter has got more punch than a whole American-mechanized division. No truer words were ever spoken.

Further down the trench, he came upon Yuming bandaging a soldier's wound. Here's a fellow who was all thumbs when he came to us from the militia a few days ago, mused Dayong. His first time in battle at Yulin, he crawled with his arms wrapped around his head and his backside sticking up in the air — scared to death. When we charged he threw his hand grenades with the safety covers still on. But just look at him today — steady, competent. How quickly battle matures a man!

A messenger, sweating profusely, ran up to Dayong and reported.

"Tiger says: Tell the commander to please pull out with the men at once."

Dayong drew back both his flanks and assembled them at the central high position which Jiangguo was holding.

"Comrades," he called, "those carrying wounded go first. Communists cover the rear. We're gong to dash out in one rush. No one is to fall behind."

Jiangguo stepped forward. "You and the others go ahead, commander. With two squads I can cover you."

Dayong gripped his hand tightly. "Right. Everything depends on you."

"I wouldn't offer to take the job if I wasn't sure I could do it."

"Good. Hold out for ten minutes or so, then follow after us."

It was noon and the deep yellow sun hung directly overhead. Clouds moved rapidly across the sky. Steamy vapour rose from the earth.

Dayong led his men to the south-west where Tiger had broken an opening in the enemy line. The enemy was pushing hard from both sides to close the gap. . . . A moment later they did so, but before they could dig in, Dayong flung his forces at them in a bayonet charge. Yelling, throwing hand grenades, the fighters charged against the confused enemy — and smashed through.

Jiangguo followed with his squads very soon after.

Although they had escaped the enemy encirclement, it was clear to Dayong that shaking off the enemy on the open plain in broad daylight was going to be difficult. Quickly, he led his men to a village. Here, he thought, they could gain time, and hold out until dark.

To hold out until dark would mean victory.

4

CARTRIDGE cases, shoes and old uniforms discarded by the KMT soldiers, cotton wadding, chicken feathers, dead draught animals. . . . littered the streets of the village. Some houses were still burning. . . . The village was completely deserted.

The PLA men looked for drinking water, but there wasn't a drop to be found anywhere. The enemy had already been through this village. After drinking it dry, they had smashed all the water jugs. They had contaminated the underground cistern by throwing in a dozen of their dead. The PLA men had been fighting since dawn — over ten hours. They had eaten nothing and their stomachs were burning with hunger. Thirst parched their throats.

Sitting on the steps of houses along the street, they brought out their ration bags and ate the dry flour, a handful at a time. The powdery white flour sprinkled their faces and the front of their uniforms. Someone made a weak attempt at a joke.

"A little more powder and we'll be ready to go on stage!"

As soon as the company entered the village, Dayong took Tiger and Jiangguo to reconnoitre. Originally inhabited by about thirty families, the village was surrounded by a mound wall twelve feet high. A hundred yards to the north was a gully running east and west. East of the village was an open plain. A small temple stood fifty yards to the south-west. On the right side of the temple was a sand dune.

Dayong sent Jiangguo with a machine-gun and a squad of men to hold the sand dune and the temple. With the remaining men, he and Tiger prepared to defend the village proper.

Feverishly the fighters set up rifle positions, dug trenches and fox-holes.

Dayong climbed the village wall and looked around. From the east, west and south, about two regiments of enemy soldiers were advancing towards the village. With large and small artillery pieces, they poured tons of steel on the defending company. American-made planes bombed and strafed. In the village, houses collapsed, burst into flames. Shells flung up showers of scorched earth. The air was acrid with the smell of powder and thick dust.

After this barrage, the enemy attacked twice. Each time the PLA company threw them back. Driven by their own machine-guns, enemy troops, in whole companies, in whole battalions, launched one charge after the next.

Dayong stood in the front line with his fighters. His face was as black as the bottom of a pot, his body was covered with mud. Bullets whistled by very close; he never even lowered his head. His ears were ringing so with exploding shells, he couldn't hear the bullets. Suddenly, five or six heavy shells struck a section of the village wall and blew it over, the blast flinging Dayong down and burying him in the earth. A moment later, he climbed out.

"Comrades! Communists!" he shouted. "Hit 'em hard!"

Fighters stood up and threw their hand grenades. Some leaped out of the trenches with tommy-guns spitting at the enemy.

"Don't give an inch! Wipe 'em out!" Every one of Dayong's thoughts and emotions was centred on this one point. Any consciousness of danger had been swept away.

The men holding the little temple south-west of the village were battling fiercely. Their bayonets gleamed in the sun, their bodies outlined against the flashes of exploding shells. . . .

From the temple dashed the young messenger, Little Cheng. Gasping for breath, he ran up to Dayong.

"Commander, the enemy's broken into our temple position. The position . . . platoon leader Jiangguo says . . . he says —"

Dayong whirled around and gripped the youngster by the arm. "What are you so excited about?" he demanded roughly. "What does Jiangguo say? Does he want reinforcements?"

"No. No. Platoon leader Jiangguo says: Tell the company commander not to worry. He can throw back the enemy. He can hold the position. He says they'll take it only over his dead body!"

"Tell him to hold out one more hour," instructed Dayong.

With twelve men, Jiangguo successfully withstood six charges by over two hundred enemy troops.

Having suffered heavy losses, the enemy became crafty. They no longer made blind frontal assaults. Before launching their seventh attack on Jiangguo's position, they first demolished the temple with artillery fire. They ripped off the roof, then pounded the walls until there were only sawtooth remains. The air was filled with flying masonry and shell splinters.

Jiangguo's face was filthy, dripping sweat. Blood trickled from a cut lip. The danger of having his life snuffed out at any moment made his brain seethe. He wanted to sing, to yell, to swear; he couldn't control his excitement. But when he looked at his men, all thought of personal safety vanished.

"They need my support; they're depending on me." The realization gave him strength. His movements became agile, competent.

"Comrades," he called, "this is a test of the stuff we're made of!"

He and his men piled the scattered bricks into a wall. The enemy blew them down again. Once more they piled the bricks. Again the bricks were blasted. Pile them up. Artillery shells threw brick fragments flying in all directions. Three or four men's heads were cut. The blast of exploding shells knocked Jiangguo down several times. The temple's wooden beams were on fire. Standing amid the thick smoke and flames, the fighters battled fiercely.

"Use whatever you've got — grenades, bayonets, bricks — anything," Jiangguo yelled. "As long as we've a man left we'll hold this position!"

The intensity of the struggle had driven from the men's minds any thought of danger. Hatred and a determination to wipe out the enemy were the only things they were conscious of.

They had run out of rifle bullets. "Let me go and get some from the company commander," one of the men suggested.

"The C.O. can't lay them the way a chicken lays eggs!" Jiangguo snapped.

"But without bullets —"

"Without bullets we'll fight anyway!"

At that moment, over a hundred enemy troops came surging towards the entrance of the temple. Jiangguo could feel the fighters looking at him.

"Let's go!" he shouted. Like a gust of hot wind he led the charge, plunging into the enemy ranks, smashing with his rifle butt, stabbing with his bayonet. . . . The enemy soldiers ran for their lives, colliding with each other in panic. Jiangguo grabbed one of them and dragged him back to the temple. With the prisoner's bullets he brought his rifle back into action.

Jiangguo and his men were ordered to return to the village.

The sun seemed to have been nailed in the western sky. Every minute dragged interminably!

Step by step, the enemy pressed closer. They were almost at the east wall of the village.

Tiger Wang and seven or eight men were firing at them from behind a low wall near the left end of eastern sector.

Tiger shot slowly and methodically, never wasting a round. Every time his rifle barked an enemy soldier went down. He counted: "One, a brace, a brace and a half, two brace . . . a half dozen. . . ."

After firing three or four shots from one place, he would quickly move to another position. The hearts of the men under Tiger Wang beat very evenly. They all fought in the same manner as he. . . .

While the men were concentrating on the enemy troops attacking from the east, another detachment of enemy soldiers swarmed over the west wall. With eleven men, Changsheng tried to stem the break-through, but it was too late. A whole battalion came pouring in. . . . Enemy soldiers soon occupied one half of the village. Flames and black smoke covered the sky.

The changing tides of battle were reflected on the face of Dayong. Flushed one moment, dark the next; now anxious, now savage. He had fought in a hundred battles and couldn't believe that he and his men would die in this village in spite of their heroic defence. He had been in much tighter spots before, when the situation had looked hopeless, yet he had managed to win out. Bah, what was so dangerous about this!

He thought only of the key problem — to hold out until dark.

The PLA fighters gave ground slowly, moving back compound by compound, defending every building, every wall, with their sweat and blood, stubbornly, courageously. . . .

But at last they were compressed into an area of four compounds at the southern end of the village.

Carefully, Dayong examined their surroundings. Only a few walls separated them from the enemy. The compounds were all walls and corners, so there was not too much danger from bullets or shells. But enemy hand grenades were dropping in like hailstones and bursting with thunderous explosions.

Dayong dashed from one compound to another. He wanted the groups defending every sector to feel he was with them. The men were steady. He offered them simple words of encouragement.

Confident, the fighters only wanted to keep firing. They had made a breach in the wall of an adjoining compound and through this opening Dayong went to see how Quanyou and his men were getting on.

The adjoining compound was thick with smoke. The roofs of the houses and several of the walls had collapsed. Flames were crackling in the fallen beams and rafters.

Some of the men had fainted from shell concussion. But as soon as they revived, they continued fighting. When a man went down, another comrade was there immediately to take his place. Men covered with blood refused to admit they were hit. A few, severely wounded, could no longer fight, but they still had mouths, and they cheered on their companions. Some wrested enemy machine-guns and turned them against the attackers. Taking advantage of the slightest enemy weakness, bravely the fighters charged, blasted, slashed, shouted. . . .

Slowly, night was falling.

From four sides the enemy launched an all-out attack. The fighters were in a sea of smoke and flames. Their lips were scorched, their ears deafened, their eyes bloodshot. But the heart of every man pounded with a powerful beat. The men shouted encouragement to one another.

"For the working people — fight to the end!"

Dayong ran from compound to compound. Wherever the fighting was fiercest, there his firm voice could be heard. His emotion-charged commands shook the fighters like thunder. Sometimes he was swallowed up by the flames, only to reappear an instant later. Even the men who knew him so well felt there was something miraculous about him today!

Dayong dashed to a compound on the left, held by Changsheng and four other men. They were firing from behind a pile of enemy bodies.

Firelight flickered on Changsheng's face. His old uniform, now smeared with grime, stretched tightly across his broad back. He was firing a machine-gun to which another fighter was feeding a belt of ammunition. His movements were unflurried, matter-of-fact. Beside the machine-gun, laid out before him ready for use was a tommy-gun, a rifle with fixed bayonet, rifle grenades, hand grenades, and a captured American trench mortar.

Crouching, Dayong suddenly plopped himself before Changsheng.

"How's it going?"

Changsheng wiped the sweat on his forehead with the back of his hand. "All right," he replied, without turning his head.

"Their charges been pretty fierce?"

"Fierce?" Changsheng spat contemptuously. "Those bastards don't bother us!"

Dayong knelt with one knee on the ground. Half a foot above his head, enemy bullets were knocking chips off the top of the brick wall. But Changsheng was sprawled across it, firing with the machine-gun against his shoulder. He kept spitting earth and dust.

"Keep your body down more," shouted Dayong.

"I will when it's necessary," replied Changsheng thickly.

Changsheng's air, the tone of his voice stirred in Dayong a feeling of joy. Again he thought — the enemy wipe out fighters like these? Not in a million years!

Turning the machine-gun over to his ammunition man, Changsheng said, "As soon as one shows his head, let him have it. Fire in short bursts."

"Right. When one shows, I knock one down. When two show, I get the pair!" said the fighter.

Changsheng took a cigarette butt from a mound beside the wall and squatted down next to Dayong. "Light up, commander," he invited. "Nothing like a cigarette." After a pause, he continued, "With two catties of tobacco, I could hold this place for a week." His attempt at a joke fell rather flat.

Dayong loved Changsheng's direct, mulish disposition. He accepted the cigarette and lit it. It was only then that he noticed he was breathing hard and his hands were shaking. Taking a hard draw on the cigarette, he handed it to Changsheng.

"Commander . . ." Changsheng started to say. Then his eyes swung to the wall. He could sense that the enemy was making another charge. Jumping to his feet, he roared:

"Give it to 'em!" He threw a hand grenade, pushed aside the man at the machine-gun, took it over and continued firing, his body shaking with the gun's vibrations, his broad, thick back drenched with sweat.

Enemy soldiers rushed toward them, yelling, howling. . . .

Dayong, Changsheng, the PLA fighters, hit the enemy with ammunition cases, rocks, broken rifles . . . anything they could lay their hands on. An enemy grenade dropped rolling at Dayong's feet. It was going to explode in a second. He quickly kicked it twelve feet away, where it blew up. Four more grenades fell before him. Wansheng, a fighter who had been wounded in three places, rushed forward, pushed Dayong to one side and snatched one of the grenades to throw back at the enemy. It exploded in his hand. His face streaming with blood, he fell to the ground. . . .

Dayong grabbed his benefactor, intending to carry him back to the shelter of the low wall. Wansheng butted Dayong away with his head.

"You go on leading us, commander. Don't bother about me. I brought down plenty of 'em. Even if I die, I've made 'em pay!"

Wansheng's clothing was dyed in blood. Of his face, only blood and grime could be seen. Even as he fainted, he was shouting:

"Hit 'em! Fight to the end!"

It was no longer a question of Dayong commanding the defence, or of Changsheng. Every man with a breath of life was fighting on his own initiative.

The situation went from bad to worse. Enemy artillery pounded the walls of the compounds and houses to dust. They rained incendiary bombs on the men in the compounds. The ground was ablaze; the very air seemed to be consumed with fire.

5

EVERY step left a sweat-soaked imprint; every inch of ground was covered with blood. At ten at night the cruel battle still raged.

Dayong ordered the men to bury their dead. The weapons of the fallen comrades they burned together with the arms they had captured from the enemy.

They had seen too much blood flow. Blood no longer moved them.

They had seen too much sudden death. They were no longer stricken by tragedy.

There was only one thought in their minds: Fight! Avenge!

"Comrades," Dayong said to them in a low voice, "we've got to smash our way out."

He counted their ranks. Aside from seven wounded, only forty-five men remained of the company. He chose a dozen men to carry the wounded on their backs.

Wansheng, heavily wounded, said, "I don't want to slow the comrades down. Leave me here, commander. I . . . I . . . I'll cover you as you pull out."

Dayong stamped with exasperation. "Wansheng, you're a Communist. You have no right —"

Wansheng crawled forward. "I'm finished, commander. My blood's almost gone. You fellows get out of here! Comrades, I ask nothing better than to die before your eyes. Let me give the last of my strength. Go on, go, comrades, go and fight! . . ."

"Jinshan," Dayong called implacably. "Carry him with us!"

As Jinshan bent to lift the wounded man, about twenty enemy troops came charging through a wrecked house on the left flank. Wansheng suddenly rose to his knees and flung Jinshan down.

"Get out of here!" he yelled.

Before Jinshan could regain his feet, Wansheng was already rapidly crawling towards the enemy. In an instant, twenty enemy bayonets were converging on him.

"Come on!" he shouted, and set off the handful of grenades he was clutching to his chest. In their blinding flash, Wansheng and half a dozen of the enemy fell together.

Dayong was shivering from head to foot. He felt as if a piece of living flesh had been ripped from his heart.

"Wansheng!" he cried with trembling lips.

Huddled close together, the men were silent. With dry, parched throats, their ears ringing, each mechanically continued to do what was necessary.

Furious, Dayong stamped his foot. He ordered the men to throw their grenades, then hissed in a voice that came through clenched teeth:

"Come with me!"

He led them in a running battle. When he gave the command, they threw grenades. Courageously, they hacked a bloody path and fought their way through the thick smoke and flames. Bullets whistled from all sides. The enemy hung on tenaciously.

Tiger Wang was to cover the withdrawal with a platoon.

Light from the big fires shone on the faces of the men. Dayong and Tiger looked at each other, eye to eye, for several seconds. Gripping Tiger tightly by the shoulder, Dayong said:

"It's hard to be a hero when the situation is bad."

"Get away from here, fast, commander," said Tiger. "The enemy's got two legs and so have we. They carry rifles, but these things we've got in our hands aren't just sticks to beat a dog with. Don't worry about us. Anything they can give out, we can take."

After giving Tiger detailed instructions, Dayong led his men away.

With fourteen fighters, Tiger held off over a thousand onrushing enemy troops and beat back three waves of attacks. The enemy deluged them with mortar and heavy artillery shells. Their position became a sheet of flame.

Step by step, the enemy pressed closer. Firing as they went, Tiger and his men fell back towards the north-west.

Calm and efficient, Tiger moved nimbly. He never shouted and his commands were brief.

Behind the shelter of a long mound, Jinshan crawled up to him and pulled him to one side.

"The company's gone towards the south-east," said Jinshan. "Why are you taking us north-west?" His voice trembled. "You're going in the wrong direction."

"I'm not blind. But I still want to go north-west."

"Why? But why?"

Tiger looked in the direction Dayong and the troops had taken. "Why?" he said slowly. "I want to pull the enemy after us so that the commander can get out of here safely. We have to buy our comrades some time."

"That means we're in for it. That means we'll never . . . we'll never get back."

"It's true we may be killed, but we'll be saving the commander and the rest of the comrades. Don't feel badly."

The battle raged far into the night. Tiger had only nine men left. Their ammunition was almost gone. Again the enemy attacked — this time from four sides.

This is it, thought Tiger. Either the fish break the net or they die! He led his men in a bayonet charge to meet the oncoming enemy. White blades clashed in mortal combat.

Ordinarily, Tiger gave the impression of being stolid and rather clumsy. But now his movements were sharply agile. Like a whirlwind, he killed two of the enemy in an instant. Then something hit him, and he fell. He knew he was wounded but he didn't know where, nor did he care. Rising to a kneeling position, he threw his last four grenades. Then, mustering all his strength, he stood up and plunged into the smoke, slashing left and right with his bayonet, boldly lunging at the enemy.

His wild dash carried him up to a flame-spitting machine-gun, terrifying the two enemy soldiers manning the gun so that they turned to flee. With one kick he knocked the gun over, dispatched one man with his bayonet, brought the other one down with his rifle butt. Threatening his frightened soldiers with a revolver, an enemy officer herded a dozen of them to surround Tiger. The PLA man had no more grenades or bullets. He faced a circle of bayonet points. With all the hatred that was in him, he whirled around, stabbed and hacked savagely. The enemy soldiers were afraid to come too close. They didn't dare shoot or use their grenades for fear of hitting one of their own men; any soldier Tiger pointed his bayonet at hastily drew back. The officer swore and fired his pistol into the air, but to no avail. His men didn't dare to close in. And so Tiger held the enemy at bay, his left leg flexed, his right leg straight, both hands gripping the rifle, its butt beneath his armpit. He stood like a man of iron.

For the first time he felt that he was a hero, a dashing fellow who towered high above the enemy soldiers surrounding him.

He never moved his head but his eyes darted from left to right. Sweeping aside an enemy soldiers' bayonet, he plunged his blade into the man's neck. While the others stood petrified at his sudden move, he ran a second man through.

To the west Tiger heard wild cries; and he raced in their direction. In the light of an enemy flare he could see Jinshan in a bitter bayonet-duel with an enemy soldier. Tiger drove his bayonet into the back of Jinshan's assailant and brought him kicking to the ground. By then, five enemy soldiers were charging Tiger from behind. He turned to see one of them rushing at him, full tilt, with a levelled bayonet. Tiger twisted out of the way, then struck back with a savage thrust of his blade. But the fellow dodged and Tiger stumbled past him and fell at the foot of a mound, smashing his rifle as he collided heavily with the ground. Another man leaped down from the top of the mound and thrust his bayonet at Tiger's chest. Tiger grasped the blade with all his strength and stopped it. As the enemy yanked back for another lunge, the edges of the bayonet carved deep cuts in the palms of Tiger's bare hands. But before the enemy soldier could strike, Jinshan came running up with half a dozen fighters and finished him off.

Tiger sighed with relief. He felt numb all over and his head was whirling. He remembered he had come to rescue Jinshan. Had he saved him?

"Jinshan," he called.

"Platoon leader," cried Jinshan hurrying toward him.

Tiger grabbed him by the arm and was just about to say something when he heard footsteps.

"Enemy!" he shouted.

Jinshan led the men to meet the attacking foe.

I've got to get up, thought Tiger. He was weak; there seemed to be stars floating before his eyes. Gritting his teeth, he tried to drag himself erect. Just then, an enemy soldier leaped from the mound on to his back. With a mighty wrench, Tiger twisted around and got his knees against the fellow's chest. Grasping the enemy's neck with both hands, Tiger choked the life out of him.

Late at night, the north wind began to blow across the ancient Great Wall, stretching endlessly into the distance. On the battlefield where the PLA men had fought so heroically, scattered embers and occasional rifle shots were the only remaining signs of the struggle.

6

AFTER Dayong and the company broke out of the encirclement, they headed directly south-east. They soon left the enemy far behind, because Tiger had drawn the KMT soldiers in the opposite direction.

They passed village after village — all deserted. Who knew where the terrors of war had driven the country folk.

The men had fought for almost twenty-four hours without a let-up. They were tired, cold, hungry, thirsty. But what each of them craved most was five minutes sleep — on the ground beside the road or even in the mud if need be. To be able to lie down and sleep — just for a little while — would be the sweetest thing in the world.

When they were getting away from the enemy, a shell had exploded near Dayong burying him and injuring his head. He had fainted from the concussion. Jiangguo had instructed one of the men to carry him.

About five miles from the battlefield, they came upon a small village. Jiangguo went in first to scout. The place was silent and empty as a tomb; not even a dog was around. It made Jiangguo's flesh creep. Then he spied a lamp glowing faintly in a window. Jiangguo tiptoed into the courtyard, poked a hole in the paper window and peered inside. An old man and an old woman were seated on the brick-oven bed. A woman of about thirty sat beside them suckling a baby. In the corner of the bed, a little child was crawling. Lying in the middle of the bed was the body of a young woman. A sheet of paper covered her face; a small lamp burned at her head. The old woman was weeping in the flickering light.

After posting guards around the village, Jiangguo carried Dayong into the house.

Dayong sat on the floor beside the bed, his back against the wall. Exhaustion and loss of blood made him dizzy. His face was white.

After a few minutes' rest, he slowly began to recover. He felt rotten; disconnected thoughts tumbled in his brain.

The old folks bustled about helping Jiangguo wash the blood from Dayong's face and giving Dayong some boiled water to drink.

Jiangguo was the first one Dayong saw when he opened his eyes. The platoon leader tried to induce him to lie down, but Dayong frowned his refusal.

Dayong sat with his hands resting on the ground on either side of him, his nails digging into the earthen floor. There was a black mist before his eyes, and the thought kept stabbing him — What am I doing here? . . . My men need me. . . . Vitality slowly returned to his body. Burning, he forced his eyes open wide and sat as straight as he could. He felt the most important thing was to sit erect.

Jiangguo and the old people carried the body of the young woman on a wooden door and placed it on the floor to the rear of the room. The old lady swept the brick bed and spread a quilt on it to make a place for Dayong.

Dayong's mind was quite clear now. His first concern was for Tiger. He asked Jiangguo, who said he had already sent men to search. Jiangguo, and the old folks wanted to lift Dayong onto the bed. Dayong shook his head.

"I'm fine sitting right here."

Jiangguo knew his stubbornness, and immediately stood aside. But the old people continued to insist.

"You can't just sit on the floor," said the old man. "See, we've got the quilt all laid out for you."

Dayong still shook his head.

"You look as if you'd been fished out of a river of blood," cried the old lady impatiently. "Ai! Get up onto the bed. You can't feel for the starving with a full belly, the saying goes, but we know too well what it means to suffer. There's not a grain of millet in our cauldron! Hurry, lie down on the bed."

That old lady could pity others in the midst of her own tribulations, her kind generous voice, touched Dayong to the quick. But he wouldn't change his mind.

"If I lie on the bed, I'll stain your quilt with blood," he said, and seeing the irritated expression on Jiangguo's face, he explained, "I can't make their quilt all dirty."

Jiangguo was bursting with anxiety. "Commander," he cried, "when you go up the mountain-side, you cut fuel; when you cross the stream, you take off your shoes. You have to act according to the situation. Things are so tough now . . . you're in such bad shape . . . I really don't understand you —"

"Comrade, this is enemy territory," Dayong interrupted. He spoke with difficulty. To the people here we represent the Party and Chairman Mao. Don't you see? The harder things are . . . the more we have to. . . ." He clamped his mouth shut. Sweat stood out on his forehead. He closed his eyes and leaned his head against the wall, breathing hard.

The old lady stared at him, amazed, then tears came to her eyes. She sat down on the edge of the brick bed and wiped her tears with the hem of her tunic.

"You've been hurt so badly and you still can think of us and worry about our quilt. Ai! There are good people in this world after all!"

Squatting on his heels, the old man rapped the brass bowl of his long-stemmed pipe against the floor. "Lie on the bed," he urged Dayong. "Don't hurt our feelings. This isn't the first time the PLA's come to our village. You shouldn't treat us like strangers."

"I said I won't, and that's final. But don't feel hurt, old uncle. I've been cold and hungry myself. So I know how precious a poor man's quilt is. It's the life of his whole family."

Dayong kept clenching his teeth. Cold sweat beaded his forehead. With his entire being he struggled against the pain.

In spite of the old man's attempts to stop her, the old lady poured out the family's tale of woe. The bitter story was like hundreds of others Dayong had heard — rent, taxes, forced labour, illness, hunger, no clothing, the son conscripted into the KMT army, the daughter-in-law ravished to death; a family that knew nothing but endless toil, plundered bare in a twinkling by the KMT bandits, burned out . . . a pit of bottomless grief, weeping tears of pure blood.

As Dayong's gaze swept the room of the poor peasants, a large stone seemed to be crushing his chest. The tiny old lady was as thin as a stick. Towards the rear of the room on the left lay the body of the daughter-in-law who had been raped to death by the KMT military police. The child sitting on the brick bed had a large head, but his arms were no thicker than thumbs. Six years old, he looked about three. The clothing of the thirty-year-old woman seated on the edge of the bed was too threadbare to hide her nakedness. Her eyes were deeply sunken; she had a large goitre. With every suck of the avid infant at her breast, her face contracted in pain. Dayong felt as if the child was gnawing at his own heart. He was sure the baby was drawing blood. The mother had no other nourishment to give.

How could they exist like this, generation after generation? Tears swam in Dayong's eyes. The peasants' images were blurred, wavering like grass in the wind. His heart was boiling in oil. Bitter tears ran down his cheeks. This little house was a world of tragedy. Compared with the agonies of these people, his own wound, the cruel battle the fighters had just been through, all seemed trifles.

Dayong turned his back on the lamplight. "Jiangguo," he said, "call our men in here to see this. . . . We must remember."

"It's not necessary, commander. Every family is just the same." Jiangguo stood facing the door. He was weeping too.

"Are there really men like this?" marvelled the country folk, staring at Dayong. They were moved. For generations they had known only extortion, oppression, and grinding, interminable poverty. But these PLA fighters — though neither relatives nor even neighbours — were willing to lay down their lives for the poor.

"Jiangguo," said Dayong, "send men out right away to find Tiger and the others. Hurry it up. I'm worried sick about them."

"I sent out a search party long ago. Long ago!"

"Where's Quanyou and Changsheng and the others?"

"On guard duty. The leader of Platoon Three is in the courtyard looking after the wounded."

"Who's acting as company Party secretary?"

"Don't you remember? After Tiger went on the cover mission, you told me to take over."

Dayong knitted his brows. The pain was making him irritable.

"What kind of a secretary are you supposed to be?" he demanded. "Standing there like a statue! Quit fussing over me and call a meeting of the Party committee, or at least put some of the members to work. A fine secretary you are! We've had heavy casualties. Come to life; get those Party members into action! Or maybe you've got some better way? As a Party secretary you're a flop. Things get tough and you don't know what you're supposed to do!"

"Commander, your wound," cried Jiangguo, rubbing his thighs with agitation. "Don't talk so much; keep calm. I'll do whatever you say."

"Then bring the Party committee here."

"But they're all on sentry duty, commander. I can't pull them off at a time like this."

"If you can't get the committee, bring me a couple of the Party group leaders. Snap into it."

A few minutes later, five Party group leaders hurried in,

panting and breathless. Concerned, they scanned the commander's face.

Supporting himself against the wall, Dayong stood up.

"Lie down, commander," Jiangguo cried.

"I can't lie down now. My men need me. I'm all right. Leave me alone."

Jiangguo dragged him by the arm. "Please. . . ."

"Let go," said Dayong angrily. "I don't have to lie around groaning just because of a little wound. I want to stand and I'm going to stand."

Leaning on the wall, Dayong braced himself. His head felt immense, his legs soft as cotton, black streaks swirling before his eyes. But the sight of the group leaders gave him strength.

"Tell the men I haven't really been wounded. My head just got a little scrape, that's all," he said. "We were badly mauled today, comrades. Let's face it. Tiger and his men haven't come back yet. The situation is still very dangerous. There may be an even bigger battle lying ahead of us. You're all acting squad and platoon leaders. If anything should happen to any of the regular leaders, take over automatically."

The group leaders watched Dayong unblinkingly. They could see the perspiration on his upper lip and the tip of his nose.

"Comrades, tell every one of our Communists: Rally the men around you; fight the enemy to the death — every KMT soldier we kill is one less class enemy. Just remember that and everything will be all right —"

He suddenly leaned heavily against the wall. Jiangguo rushed up and threw his arms around him as support. Jiangguo was almost in tears.

"Commander, nothing must happen to you. . . ."

When Dayong opened his eyes again, the group leaders had gone. But I hadn't finished, he thought. Then he turned his head and saw Jiangguo holding him up from behind.

"What are you cradling me for?" he growled. "I'm no baby. Go find Tiger. Go on, be quick about it."

Just as Jiangguo was about to depart, the men who had covered the company's withdrawal arrived in the village.

Dayong was happy but worried. He couldn't wait to hear how the fighters had fared. He yelled for Tiger, but his shout was drowned by chatter in the courtyard.

"Today was really dangerous!"

"Danger and victory are old friends!"

"I learned one thing today: The weaker you act, the more the enemy takes advantage; the tougher you act, the more they fear you!"

"We killed and wounded at least five hundred of them!"

"Even thin strands, if you weave 'em real tight, make a good strong rope. So of course when we people's fighters stick close together, the enemy doesn't stand a chance!"

"The sons of bitches'll have a hard time explaining this day's work to old Truman!"

Dayong's heart beat wildly. He couldn't hear Tiger's drawl among the excited voices. From the men's cheerful tone, he guessed that probably nothing had happened to him, but immediately he reprimanded himself: You can't be so sure. Nothing can hold down the men's spirits for long.

When Jiangguo came in a moment later, Dayong didn't have to ask. The grief written on Jiangguo's face, in spite of his attempt to conceal it, was clearer than any words could be. Dayong's heart turned to ice and the blood congealed in his veins. Tiger dead? Never. Impossible. Afraid to ask, yet he had to know.

"Tiger?"

"Killed in action."

For a long time no one spoke. The little flame in the lamp danced and flickered. The peasant family stared at Dayong and Jiangguo. The heavy atmosphere was oppressive.

"Where is his body?" said Dayong.

"Probably buried where he fell."

"Probably!" cried Dayong sharply. "Probably! You muddle-headed nitwit!"

Jiangguo couldn't get his words out fast enough. "Commander, commander, what can I say? I . . . commander, Jinshan said they buried the dead before they left. . . . In the middle of the night . . . nobody could see anything too clearly. . . ."

"What's this?" snapped Dayong. "They couldn't identify his body? If Tiger died, a thousand years from now people will still be able to recognize his bones!" Dayong's breathing was short and rapid.

Jiangguo wrung his hands, kneaded his chest. "Anyhow . . . anyhow, I can't say for sure. I. . . ."

Dayong sat with his back against the wall, his eyes fixed on the side of the brick bed. He could hear the men talking near the compound wall. They were all discussing Jinshan. Probably it was Jinshan who had led them back. But to Dayong, it seemed that they were grouped around Tiger, chatting, and that Tiger was squatting in a quiet corner, smiling and slowly puffing on his short pipe. But then a small voice reminded him: Tiger is dead! And Dayong's heart was seared and hot tears rolled down his cheeks.

Tiger! Have you really left us? Dayong felt as if one of his arms had been hacked off.

He sought out the men who had fought beside Tiger and questioned each of them minutely. He found that not one of them could say definitely how Tiger had died. Among the effects brought back of the fallen comrades there was nothing that belonged to him. Dayong weighed every detail carefully. He came to the conclusion that there was a thread of hope.

Tiger might still be alive.

7

ABOUT three-thirty in the morning, Dayong led his men toward the south-east. The fighters had improvised a stretcher of thick branches and wanted to carry him, but Dayong resolutely refused. At first he walked with a stick. After a few miles he threw even that away.

It was very cold and the wind was whistling. The sky was like a sheet of ice, thick with stars twinkling cold and clear.

The long shadowy column tramped on. Bearing the scars of battle, the men carried their wounded companions across shifting sands and muddy wastes. Hungry, they painfully groped their way through the darkness with only the stars for a cover, ready to plunge into desperate struggle at any moment.

Dayong marched alongside the column, listening to the men's quiet conversations. Some said they were so hungry their stomachs were sticking to their backbones, and talked about what they'd like most to eat. Some said they'd give anything for only one minute's nap. Another said he was so irritable from lack of sleep, he'd like to pick a quarrel.

"Quit your nonsense, comrades," Dayong interrupted. "Listen to me —" But before he could continue, Yuming, leader of the advance squad, rushed back to report:

"Enemy troops ahead!"

"How many?" Dayong asked quickly.

"Can't tell exactly. Saw seven or eight moving outside that village up ahead. Look like a patrol."

At the word "enemy" Dayong's heart burst into flame. He was burning for revenge, and his vitality bounded back as if he had never been hurt and exhausted. He directed Jiangguo to get the men under cover in the shelter of a bluff. After resting a few minutes, he took Changsheng and Quanyou, and went ahead to investigate.

The three men followed a highway directly south. They alternately walked and crept forward softly.

Stealing closer to the village, they found the road sprinkled with grain. Dayong halted at the foot of a bluff near the road. He pondered silently, a blade of grass in his teeth. Changsheng didn't want to interrupt his commander's thoughts, and he continued to creep forward. In spite of his rough exterior, Changsheng had a keen mind. He analyzed every stick and stone encountered in his path.

Why so much grain on the highway? Dayong wondered. Could there be an enemy grain station in the village? If there is, we'll destroy it! He was obsessed with the idea of striking the enemy. The prospect excited him, stimulated him.

Yet a small voice within him protested: What if there is a grain station? Pass it by, even if it isn't heavily manned. The men are too worn out.

That's a disgraceful way to think, another voice immediately retorted. Are we going to let a chance to hit the enemy slip by? Are we the kind who scare easily, and turn tail and run? Isn't this our chance to avenge Tiger?

Changsheng came back to report: "There's a lot of millet on the road up ahead, and a dead donkey. My guess is that there's an enemy grain station in the village, for sure."

"There's nothing sure about it," said Quanyou. "The station may be in some village beyond here."

Dayong circled around to the opposite side of the village, where the road again emerged. The road here was free of grain.

He examined the village from all sides. The enemy troops didn't have the appearance of men camping after a day's march, nor were there any telephone lines running out of the village. It looked like a grain station all right, protected by a garrison. And grain was of first importance both to us and to the enemy.

The three men returned to the company which was waiting for them under cover north of the village. Dayong called a meeting of squad and platoon leaders and related his findings. Everyone agreed they should attack.

"Let's go, commander," Jiangguo kept urging. "Night raids, hand-to-hand fighting — that's what the enemy fears most."

"That's right," said Changsheng. "They never know what's hitting 'em in night raids. Let's chew into 'em."

Dayong too was anxious to get at the enemy. But he was still puzzled about the patrol he had seen — why did it patrol only east of the village? Was it because there were other enemy camps in the neighbourhood? And how many troops were there in the village? How were they deployed? He didn't like these holes in his knowledge.

"Decide, commander, decide," Quanyou insisted. "Every battle has its risks. Let's just slam into them. We'll catch them off guard and knock them dizzy."

"If only we're right about the situation, I'm all for polishing off the enemy troops in the village," said Dayong.

News of the impending battle quickly spread through the ranks. No one had told them, but the men could feel it in their bones. They began tightening their leg-wrappings, adjusting their knapsacks and belts. Nothing could depress their fighting spirit for long.

The men's enthusiasm infected Dayong. He was stirred by the pre-battle tension and excitement. But his sense of responsibility as a leader clashed with his emotional urge to drive ahead blindly, and the conflict made him irritable.

With his mouth close to Jinshan's ear he whispered, "Take a man with you and bring back a prisoner we can question. I want a prisoner, but no matter what happens you're not to fire your gun or make any noise. Can you do it?"

"There's no question of can or can't. You want a prisoner and we'll get you one."

Dayong slapped Jinshan on the back. "Do your stuff."

With his younger brother Erzi, Jinshan set out towards the village.

"What are you carrying that's clanking so?" Jinshan asked him.

"Must be my drinking cup hitting against the handle of a hand grenade."

"Well, stop it right away. Everything you do, you're so careless and sloppy; I'm worried about you every time we go into battle. When you have to run across a stretch of open ground, you first ought to see what there is up ahead you can use for cover. But you — you just don't use your head." He rubbed Erzi's back. "Cold?"

"Freezing. I don't mind that so much, but I'm dying for sleep. I can't keep my eyes open."

"Don't you dare doze off. Haven't you applied to join the Party? I took you with me to give you a chance to distinguish yourself."

"What about your application? Any news? You're the only squad leader in our company who isn't a Communist."

"Don't remind me. If I only had known how much I'd suffer for going 'over the hill,' I'd have died before pulling a shameful stunt like that. I'm willing to die now, if blood can wipe out my disgrace."

"From the way I hear the Party members talk, they all think you ought to be admitted."

"Even if they do, I don't want to join yet."

Erzi drew a sharp breath. "Why not? Brother, what do you mean?"

"Nothing." They were crawling on the ground and Jinshan pressed his face against his arm. "I'm not going to let myself join the Party. Just look at the Communists in our company. They face danger without batting an eye. And they have such wonderful ideals: Not only do they want the poor to have land and enough to eat — they even want to lead them to socialism. How can I compare with such men? I'm full of faults. Erzi, I'm sure I can go forward following the line of the Party, but I'm not good enough to be a Communist. So I'm not going to join, no matter how much it hurts."

Erzi could hear his brother weeping. How badly he must feel. Erzi regretted he had prodded his brother's open wound. He changed the subject.

"When do you think we'll catch up with our main forces?"

Jinshan poked him, signalling him to come along. They crept to the shelter of a bluff where they stopped and rested. Only then did Jinshan reply.

"Don't you worry about our main forces. Our army fights in many different ways. Even our own company can't find our main forces; what chance has the enemy got? But I guarantee in nine or ten days they'll suddenly show up

somewhere and win a big victory. I've seen it happen many times."

"Our army is always rushing around like the wind, here one minute and there the next. Why don't we line up squarely against the enemy? They're only a bunch of useless straw-bellies. In a pitched battle we could clean them out in a couple of days."

"Pitched battle? There are hundreds of thousands of them; do you know how many we've got? Suppose you were in command? How would you fight such a battle? I told you time and again — we're fighting a war of movement. When it's to our advantage, we strike. When it's not, we move somewhere else. We finish them off bit by bit. They crumble while we keep getting stronger. But that's on one condition — that we cover lots of ground and stand up under hardships."

"It's ourselves we're fighting for, when you come right down to it. So we'll stand up to the hardships all right. You can bet on that."

The two brothers crept to the wall surrounding the village.

"Squat down," whispered Jinshan. "I'll get on your shoulders and then you boost me to the top of the wall."

"No. Let me go first."

"I'm the squad leader," Jinshan hissed. "You obey my orders."

The word "orders" had a magical effect. Erzi suppressed his eagerness.

Before long, Jinshan and Erzi returned to their waiting comrades. From his back Jinshan tossed a heavy object at Dayong's feet. It landed with a thump.

"Erzi, take the gag out of his mouth."

"Aiya, aiya, don't kill me . . ." groaned the thing on the ground.

"Why did you bring a man that's half dead?" demanded Dayong.

"I had to clip him a few to quiet him down, didn't I?" said Jinshan. "Go on, question him, commander. There's nothing wrong with his mouth." And he added hastily, "Erzi made the capture single-handed."

Dayong shook hands with Erzi, then questioned the prisoner. The man said that after the enemy Thirty-sixth Division had relieved Yulin, it travelled south down the main highway in pursuit of the PLA. As for the village, there was a large grain station in it, guarded by a battalion. Two of the battalion's three companies were out escorting grain shipments. Only battalion headquarters and one company remained in the village. The commanding officer was a lieutenant-colonel. A low wall ran around the village, with gates on the north and south sides. That same night a KMT regiment had quartered itself in a village about two miles to the west. The prisoner claimed that the PLA had lost more than half its forces after leaving Yulin; the remainder had fled to the Yellow River and was trying to cross. So the garrison guarding the grain station was very relaxed. The enemy soldiers were eating and drinking and enjoying life.

When his company attacked the village, would the shooting arouse the nearby enemy regiment? — wondered Dayong. No. The regiment wouldn't be able to tell immediately what was happening in the dark and would not dare to make any sudden move. Night fighting had special characteristics ... the enemy feared being cut off, surrounded.... In the PLA company there remained a total of thirty-eight men. Dayong sent a squad under Quanyou to wipe out the patrol and serve as guards during the battle. But what about the assault on the village? Once we get in there, victory will be ours, Dayong thought, then he hesitated. We can start the fight

easily enough, but finishing it may not be so easy. He had to know more about the set-up in the village. He decided to reconnoitre the outskirts himself. After a few words of instruction to Jiangguo, he set out with five soldiers.

Outside the north end of the village they stopped and listened. They rested a few minutes, then proceeded quietly to a gully which approached the village from the north-east. The gully was seven or eight feet deep. In it was a wide road leading directly to the village.

Exhaustion virtually paralyzed Dayong's arms and legs and his head wound stabbed with pain. Lying on the edge of the gully, he rested his head on the backs of his hands. If our men go in through here, they'll have some cover, he mused, but the enemy's sure to be watching a big road like this. As he pondered, he thought he detected a noise in the distance. He pressed his ear against the ground and listened. But the earth was damp and transmitted sound poorly. He tried listening, holding his breath. There was a noise all right, and it was coming closer. About ten minutes later, a train of pack animals approached. Dayong and his men quickly hid in the tall sorghum.

"Travelling at night is dangerous," said a voice from the road. "We ought to be very careful."

"How much more careful can you get? You can't wrap your head in iron."

Enemy soldiers! Dayong grew tense. Tightly clutching the icy handle of his Mauser in a grip that habit made sure, he watched the road. A number of camels led the procession and on them were seated enemy soldiers with rifles slung across their backs. The soldiers swayed as if asleep in their saddles. Behind the camels came a long train of donkeys.

An idea flashed into Dayong's mind. The donkey drivers must be peasants. Why not jump down and mingle among them and go with them into the village? Dayong was thinking furiously. What if there were enemy soldiers in the donkey train? Get involved in a fight out here? Should he slip into the train personally? He was dizzy and his legs were weak. Besides, he had to lead the company. Send for Jiangguo or Quanyou? No good. By the time one of them could arrive, the dish would be cold. Let a couple of soldiers sneak in with the train? No. The men with him were all inexperienced. There was too much at stake. One false move and they'd give the whole show away.

The donkeys were still passing. But he had to make up his mind at once.

He whispered in the ear of one of the fighters, giving him instructions for Jiangguo on how to enter the village. Dayong told the man to fly, then said something to the other four soldiers.

Edging forward, his neck rigid, Dayong fixed his eyes unblinking on the road. One by one, the little donkeys continued to parade past. He pressed his hand against his head wound, then set his teeth and leaped into the road. The four soldiers jumped behind him.

Dayong grabbed a driver. "Don't make a sound," he threatened in a low voice.

The man was frightened. "No, no. I won't open my mouth."

"Got a gun?"

"I'm a peasant. They forced me to come along and drive donkeys."

"Liar."

"I swear. As sure as I've white teeth in a red mouth. May Heaven strike me dead if I'm telling even half a lie."

Dayong ran his hands over the man's body. The fellow had a white towel turban on his head, was wearing an old fleece-lined gown and had a long-stemmed pipe stuck in the sash around his waist. A peasant, unquestionably. Dayong released his breath.

The peasant was trembling violently. Who was this man who had suddenly dropped from the sky? What did he want?

"Where are you from, uncle?"

"Out — outside Yulin," stammered the peasant.

"What are you doing out here with these donkeys in the middle of the night?"

"I'm a hired farm hand. Last night the running dog of the ward boss dragged me off to ship grain for the army."

Dayong felt the sacks on the donkey. There was grain in them, that was true. He considered what the man had said and the tone of his voice.

One of the fighters came up and reported that all the drivers in the train were peasants, each driving four or five donkeys; armed enemy soldiers on camels were bringing up the rear. Dayong said a few words to the fighter, then continued questioning the peasant.

"Is the enemy escort large?"

"No. Just one squad in front and one behind."

"Do you know who I am?"

"I — I can't say for sure."

"I'm a soldier of the PLA."

The peasant thought a moment. "Ah, so you're PLA men."

"There's a division of us, uncle, come to attack the enemy in this village. Show us the way in, what do you say?"

"Why, why — of course! I, I've never been in a battle before. . . . You're really PLA men? Then take my fleece gown. Wear it to hide your uniform."

"Are the other country folk driving the donkeys reliable?"

"Every one of them. They're all poor. You don't think any rich man would be sent out on a job like this."

"You go and talk to them. Tell them to cover our men."

"That can be done, that can be done."

"Not can — must! If anything goes wrong, you'll all be caught right in the middle."

"Do my best," said the peasant, and he trotted off towards the rear.

As the caravan drew close to the village, shots were heard to the east. Quanyou and his squad must be clashing with the enemy patrol.

From the village came a clamour of shouts.

The soldiers on the dozen camels at the head of the procession reached the north gate and, after an exchange with the sentries, entered the village. They were followed by the five or six donkeys immediately ahead of Dayong. His eyes swept the gate entrance. Enemy soldiers were standing in fox-holes; some stood beside the gate; a few were running back and forth. They seemed to be in a bad state of jitters.

A wild scene met Dayong's gaze as he walked through the gate. The street was jammed with soldiers assembling into ranks. Shouts, whistles blowing, curses, the whinny of horses and donkeys, filled the air with an insane tumult. Dayong's eyes darted in every direction. He was tense, his heart beating fast, a joyous excitement rising into his throat. His vision seemed exceptionally keen; he felt powerful, agile. He wanted to rush madly, yelling, firing, to slash these murderous cannibals to pieces. He dispatched two fighters to take up positions at the north gate they had just entered, and to control it when the time came. At his side he kept only Erzi and Yuming.

On the steps of a peasant's house stood an officer. He was shining a flashlight all around and shouting:

"Quiet in the ranks! Those shots to the east were only our patrol running into a few enemy stragglers. Where is your battalion commander? Will the battalion commander please come forward? What are you soldiers in such a panic about? Swine! Cowardly dogs!"

A man with a briefcase rushed up and saluted. "Colonel, the major will be here immediately."

Dayong's heart jumped. So that's the lieutenant-colonel. Glancing behind him, he could see Erzi and Yuming gathering themselves to spring.

He ran out, pointed his pistol at the side of the lieutenant-colonel's head and pulled the trigger. There was a loud report and the officer slumped to the ground like a sack of grain.

The entire street became a bedlam. There were wild shots, foul curses, yells and shouts. From the south end of the street a man on a big horse came charging into the milling crowd. He reined in the animal so abruptly that the horse's front hoofs pawed the air. Whinnying sharply, the animal trampled men, and the men struck back at the maddened beast with their rifle butts. The horse plunged forward a few steps, then fell to its knees while its rider fired his pistol into the air, twice.

"Listen to my orders!" the man howled. "Company Two. I want the commander of Company Two. . . ."

Yuming said something to Dayong, then pushed his way through the crowd. A moment later he drove his bayonet up through the rider's ribs. The man squealed like a stuck pig and fell from the horse. Terrified, the animal leaped over the heads of the jammed soldiers and bolted down the street.

The two fighters Dayong had sent to the gate finished off the guards and sealed the north exit. Dayong, Yuming and

Erzi sprayed the enemy soldiers in the narrow street and threw hand grenades.

Thoroughly confused, some enemy troops ran south, others dashed north, their panic increasing by the minute.

At the same time, the firing east of the village increased in intensity, and the sound of it drew nearer.

Dayong was all in a lather for fear that enemy soldiers would climb to the roofs of the buildings that flanked the street. But they had lost any semblance of order. Officers were separated from their men; men couldn't find their officers. Soldiers swarmed in all directions.

Puffing and panting, Jiangguo and his men came running up the gully road and entered the village. They immediately set up three light machine-guns and turned them on the enemy in the street.

"First get some men up on the roof-tops," Dayong ordered.

"I've done that long ago!" replied Jiangguo.

Almost before the words were out of his mouth, from the houses on both sides of the street, hand grenades began raining down on the heads of the enemy soldiers. In the light of the flames, enemy soldiers could be seen falling left and right. The village rang with the cries of the PLA fighters:

"Throw down your arms and be spared!"

"The PLA treats prisoners well!"

In twenty minutes the battle was over.

The street was ablaze. It was littered with enemy bodies, dead horses and mules, quilts, mortars, small cannon, heavy machine-guns. . . .

Jiangguo rounded up the prisoners and counted them. There were over a hundred. He separated the officers from the men and assigned guards.

Dayong shook Changsheng's hand. "Wasn't that you in charge of our men on the roof-tops? You did a beautiful job."

"We made them pay with a hundred lives for our one Tiger!"

Entering the house formerly occupied by the enemy battalion commander, Dayong was intending to question a few of the prisoners about the neighbouring countryside. Suddenly heavy firing was heard to the west. Dayong pressed his fists on the table in front of him, his face grave. After thinking a while, he turned to Jiangguo.

"Pick out a dozen or two of the more shifty-eyed prisoners and let them escape. But before that, let word 'leak' out that our forces are very large and that we're moving north."

"The enemy will see through that without batting an eye."

"Maybe so. But getting all kinds of conflicting reports, they'll have to analyze them, and while they're analyzing we can be ten miles away from here. Besides, they're pretty cautious about how they move about in the dark."

While the men were picking up usable equipment off the battlefield Jiangguo called back the guard patrol that had been stationed west of the village. Then Dayong had the fighters load up with a good supply of ammunition, made the prisoners carry rifles from which the bolts had been removed, and marched the company out of the village. They advanced quietly towards the south-east.

After they had covered about two miles, a scout hurried back to report that a battalion had been moving east from the village where the enemy regiment was stationed, but that it had suddenly turned and fled back to its village and was now feverishly throwing up fortifications.

Dayong grinned. "They can go on with their work while we continued our march — neither interfering with the other."

8

THE company marched a few more miles and entered a wide gorge.

Shortly before dawn, the fighters climbed a mountain; then they halted for a short rest. Dayong had just sat down when blood began pouring out of his mouth.

"Commander, what's wrong?" Jiangguo cried in alarm.

Dayong kicked some earth over the blood on the ground. "Nothing. Don't make a fuss."

He put his arm across Jiangguo's shoulders.

"You're right, old friend. — Things are in bad shape. But right now you and I have to think of our men first. They've been soaked by the rain, they've fought, shed blood. They've had no food, no sleep; they've walked their feet down to the bone. After battling without a let-up they've had to march, the slightly wounded carrying the badly wounded. Jiangguo, they haven't said a word, but I know they're gritting their teeth to carry on. It's been much rougher on them than on me. Jiangguo, I've got an idea. Get a couple of prisoners who come from poor families to tell our men what life is like in the enemy army, especially how the common soldier is treated like dirt. It'll be a good education for them."

"Yes, we ought to do that. But anyhow, you must take care of yourself. You —"

Dayong cut him short. "Let's go. Dawn is breaking."

Jiangguo brought his head close. "Commander, let me say one word —"

Dayong pushed him aside and stood up. "Let's go, comrades," he called.

The men crawled to their feet, stretching, rubbing their eyes. Many, though standing, were still fast asleep.

With his back against a bluff, Jiangguo stood motionless. Gloomily he peered at the sprinkling of stars in the grey dawn sky. For the first time he felt disturbed.

"Pass the word along," Dayong said to the men nearest him. "Stick close together. No one is allowed to drop out of ranks."

Dayong set out with large strides at the head of the column. From time to time he stepped to the side of the road and watched the men march past, listening carefully to the rhythm of their feet and the sound of their heavy breathing.

After they had travelled three or four miles, suddenly, a whisper swept through the column:

"Keep your eyes open for the enemy."

Dayong heard the whinnying of pack animals on the mountain to the left. Looking up, he saw a string of many shadows on the ridge, moving south. This must be the Thirty-sixth Division of KMT warlord Hu Zongnan. After relieving Yulin it had immediately turned south in search of the PLA. The troops on the ridge had not yet noticed Dayong and his PLA fighters marching in the gorge.

Quickly ordering his men to take cover, Dayong climbed to a piece of higher ground and examined the surrounding terrain. They were hemmed in by mountains on all sides. The gorge was flat and not very wide and was covered with scattered wild date and willow trees. A small stream cut through the length of the gorge from the foot of the mountain on the north. Dayong ordered the men to place the eight heavily wounded in a cave; he told Quanyou to take seven men and escort the prisoners to the concealment of a bluff near the stream and keep them quiet. With Jiangguo and thirty fighters, Dayong then began climbing the eastern mountain. Their idea was to get to a position where they could defend the withdrawal of the wounded and the prisoners in case the enemy discovered them.

The men who remained in the gorge were unable to light a fire for cooking, nor could they drink any water, although the stream was flowing right before them. All day long, enemy soldiers and pack animals continued passing south along the western ridge.

At sunset, Dayong slipped down the eastern slope in a rapid zigzag and returned to the cave where the wounded were resting. He intended to lead them out after dark.

In the cave he found the little medical orderly, San Niu, feeding uncooked millet to the wounded men. The millet was among the stores captured the night before. Now it was the best item in the fighters' diet.

The men were pale from loss of blood, their eyes large and sunken. The wounds of several were very painful. When San Niu changed their dressings, many had to clench their teeth, the sweat standing out on their foreheads. But not one groaned or cried out. When the pain became too unbearable, a man stuffed clothing in his own mouth and bit into it hard. Each feared that the sound of his suffering might depress his companions.

Dayong would have given anything to be able to take some of their pain on himself. He crawled from one wounded man to the next, wiping sweat from their faces, looking into their eyes.

"It's much cheerier with you here, commander," said one.

"If it weren't for us wounded holding them back, our comrades would have strolled out of here long ago," another said worriedly.

"It'll be dark in another hour, comrades," Dayong told them. "Then we can leave. Maybe before daylight we'll get back to the liberated area and catch up with our army. How happy everyone will be to see us."

He sat leaning against the wall. An instant later, he was asleep. He dreamed he was riding a red sorrel stallion, flying across a plain through smoke and shell. He was shouting commands and the men were charging at the enemy like the wind, like a rushing cataract. . . .

"Commander," cried a voice.

Dayong opened his eyes. Night and Quanyou had entered the cave together.

"What are you doing here?" Dayong demanded quickly.

"Come to see how you and the wounded are getting on."

Dayong scrambled to his feet. "You're guarding over eighty prisoners with only seven men. Why have you really come?"

"No special reason. Just wanted to see you all."

But Dayong knew something had gone wrong. He stepped out of the cave. Big enemy campfires were blazing on all the surrounding mountains! Where could Jiangguo and the thirty others have gone?

Just before dark an enemy detachment had approached from the north to set up a camp on the eastern mountain. When Jiangguo, Changsheng and the others discovered them, at first they considered getting back to the gorge where Dayong and the wounded were hidden. But time was too short. Jiangguo had to take the only path that remained open. He led the men through a grove of trees down into a ravine on the opposite side of the mountain.

Dayong re-entered the cave, swearing. "Of all the rotten luck. Quanyou, get back to your men. Tell them to keep a close watch on the prisoners."

"Hanging around in this gorge is no good," said Quanyou.

"If you ask me, we ought to carry the wounded on our backs, head the prisoners together and make a dash for it."

"That's easy enough to say. You forget you've only got seven men under you."

"All the enemy has to do is squeeze down on us from those mountains and they'll flatten us like pancakes."

Dayong punched the earthen wall of the cave. "Flatten us, will they. What's wrong, have the enemy got you scared?" he asked with biting acidity. His concern about Jiangguo and the men was making Dayong highly irritable.

Quanyou slumped down on his heels and leaned against the wall, his arms resting on his knees. The young fighter's face was twitching; his heart felt as if it were being roasted on a hot griddle.

He clutched his head in his hands. "It would be better if the enemy shot me down," he mumbled. "Then I wouldn't have all this aggravation."

"You're out of your mind," roared Dayong.

Two rifle shots on the mountain-top broke the stillness of the night. Then horses whinnied in long shivering cries in a way that chilled a man's heart.

"Even with only one man left we could still make a bloody mark on the enemy thousands, to say nothing of what we can do now with a few dozen bold fighters!" Dayong's voice rang like steel in the little cave.

"One or two men make a small target," said Quanyou. "You take one of the men and leave. Turn the wounded over to me. I'll stick it out here, come what may."

"Why should I leave?"

"How could we ever explain to the Party if anything should happen to you? How could we face people?"

Dayong laughed coldly. "All you talk about is protecting me. What makes me more precious than anyone else?"

"Your head's hurt . . . you've lost a lot of blood. Anyhow —"

"Anyhow, quit hanging around here, arguing. Get back to those prisoners."

"I was only thinking —" Quanyou began timidly.

"Thinking what?" Dayong exploded. "All right then, stay here! I'll go watch the prisoners!" He stood up, but because he rose too quickly his head swam; stars flew before his eyes. Swaying, he leaned a hand against the wall for support. By the time he recovered, Quanyou had scooted out of the cave.

As Quanyou was swallowed up in the darkness, Dayong regretted he had been so harsh. He wished Quanyou were back, close beside him. A man used to leading soldiers is strangely empty when only a few of them are at hand. He feels insecure; he even sleeps poorly.

According to the calendar, summer wasn't quite over yet. But nights along the Great Wall are fearfully cold, and the wind blows rolling clouds of sand.

Enemy campfires still burned on the mountain-tops. There were rifle shots and the sound of hand grenades on the mountain to the east, and enemy flares and rocket signals rose in the eastern sky. Jiangguo and the boys have probably run into the enemy, thought Dayong, his heart heavy. One thing was certain — he wouldn't be able to get the wounded and the eighty prisoners out of the gorge tonight.

The wounded men, fearing that he would worry about them, clenched their jaws and refused to groan. Only when they were sinking into sleep did involuntary sounds escape their lips.

Huang Shangqing, very severely wounded, was dying. "Cold, cold," he kept saying. Dayong wished he could light a fire for him, but it was too risky. He opened his tattered jacket and wrapped it around Huang, holding him against his chest to warm him. Their hearts beat together. Huang was his soldier, his comrade, his brother. If only one could give part of one's life force to a dying comrade.

Huang moaned feebly. It seemed to Dayong that Huang's heart was beating weaker and weaker. A chill spread from Dayong's spine into his every vein and nerve. Finished. He put his hand inside Huang's shirt. The soldier's heart was still. Life had quietly departed. Rocking Huang in his arms, Dayong called his name. . . . His back against the earthen wall, he continued to press Huang to his chest. For a long time Dayong didn't move. He felt nothing. His brain was blank.

Dayong gently placed Huang's body on the ground. Then he lay down and tried to get some rest.

It was a long night. Swaying the trees in the gorge, the wind blew into the cave. Enemy campfires glowed on the mountain-tops. A machine-gun chattered in the distance.

To a mind numbed by grief, time moves slowly and heavily.

Dayong heard San Niu weeping and knew what was going on in his mind. The boy was a stubborn little fighter, but he was only a child after all. Dayong looked at the boy and looked at the wounded men. No artillery is rocking the earth, he thought, and there's no clash of bayonets. But here is intense fighting taking a more cruel form, and courage and determination are needed too.

Seated beside the body of Huang, Dayong pondered. When his company had marched with the main forces, it was only one small unit in the long line of march. In battle, the company's responsibility was limited to a certain position in a certain sector. The ideological work in the company was handled by political instructor Chengde; above Chengde was the battalion commander and battalion political instructor, the regimental commander and the regimental commissar. . . . All the heavy burdens, all the hardships, were their problems. And he, Dayong, where did he fit in? In that unified body, he was always unruffled, no matter how difficult the situation, no matter how powerful the enemy.

Now he had to carry the whole load himself — all the bitterness, all the hardships. What's more, he knew that the men were thinking: Don't worry; our company commander will bring us through. . . . And it was right that they should feel this way. But did he actually have any way out?

Brigadier Chen, the regimental political commissar, battalion political instructor Zhang Pei, company political instructor Chengde — his dear companion in battle — many clashes, many situations, many people, he could see them all. It was as if the excitement of the past few days had pushed them to the back of his mind and now they had all surged forward again. Yes, without the Party, without the army, without many, many comrades, he would be quite worthless. Very likely he'd have died long ago under the eaves of some house or by the roadside. He had grown up in the great family of the revolution. And what he had learned from various individuals and various circumstances during his life in this great family had given him courage. A fiery strength blazed in his chest.

In his mind, he recalled his own struggles during the past ten years. He had camped out in the rain on mountain-tops, he had slept in tall buildings; he had gone through artillery barrages, he had taken part in meetings where he was decorated for valour. . . . War certainly compresses a world of experience into one tight package. Hope, excitement, anxiety, anger, being on the knife edge between life and death — all the feelings that an ordinary man might experience in ten years, in fifty years — a soldier in battle goes through them in the course of a few hours. He had stopped hot steel with his cool flesh, and he had won much, laboriously, with bullet and blade. Yes, he had travelled a long way on the path of heroes, and he would go much further along that road in the future. He had wished for many things and he had done many things; hereafter, he would accomplish much more. Right now he was stuck in a mountain cave, aggravated at times to the bursting point, fretting over petty details. But none of that mattered. Only one thing was worth thinking about, and that was fighting boldly for the cause of the people.

Towards morning Quanyou hurried into the cave to report that enemy soldiers on the eastern mountain were leaving. Dayong went out for a look. It was true that most of the enemy were gone from the east mountain, but on the western ridges troops were still advancing in a compact continuous line.

"The hell with them," said Quanyou. "Let's take our wounded and our prisoners and get out. If the enemy attacks, we'll tear into 'em."

"Wait a little longer," said Dayong. "It looks to me as if they'll be off both the east and west mountains before long."

Soon the eastern mountain was free of enemy troops. Dayong sent a soldier up to the ridge to scout. A little later, he returned. He said they would still have to wait. The next mountain to the east of the gorge's eastern mountain had enemy troops on it travelling south. The PLA men would have to see how the situation developed, then decide what action to take.

Dayong plunged into the cave and threw himself down, breathing hard. He was in a rotten temper. The least thing made him flare into a rage.

9

THE sun was pressing down on the western hills. Another day would soon be over.

Dayong had not been resting more than five minutes when loud rifle fire, very close at hand, made his hair stand on end. He ran to the entrance of the cave and was greeted by a fierce volley of shots. He pulled back quickly. Bullets knocked off chips of stone, churned the earth.

Almost all the enemy had left the surrounding mountains. But men were constantly deserting, and an enemy platoon, searching for some of the runaways, had come down into the gorge from its northern end. Prying and poking everywhere, they were getting very close to the cave where Dayong and the wounded PLA men were concealed. Quanyou watched them, his heart at the bursting point. But he had only seven men, and they were guarding more than eighty prisoners. Holding his rifle, he kept his eyes on the enemy. Unless they discovered the cave, he would not fire.

Suddenly, the prisoners began a mad rush in all directions. The enemy platoon started shooting.

At the sound of the firing, the rear guard of the troops passing on the western ridge came charging down into the gorge. Bullets were whizzing thick and fast. . . . Dividing his men into two groups, Quanyou sent one of them off with the thirty prisoners that remained. He commanded the other group and covered the withdrawal. Firing as they fell back, Quanyou and his men headed east.

An enemy detachment launched a savage assault against the cave.

Dayong, Little Cheng, San Niu, and all the wounded who were able to move, met the attack. Throwing grenades, shooting, the enemy shouted:

"Surrender! Surrender!"

"You dogs are blind," roared Dayong. "The PLA never surrenders! Don't you see who we are?"

The battle raged on for ten or fifteen minutes. Smoke covered the sky. Bullets and chips of stone flew through the air. Two of the wounded were killed. Little Cheng and San Niu kept dashing out of the cave to fling grenades at the enemy, then scurrying back to throw themselves prone on the floor of the cave and continue firing. Dayong also lay on the ground, using his big pistol. The three weapons were deadly accurate, and the enemy kept their distance.

Because the enemy didn't dare approach the cave, they tied together a large bundle of brushwood, lit it, and dropped it in front of the entrance from the slope above. The leaping flames licked into the cave. Enemy fire was so heavy that a dash from the cave was impossible. Besides, many of the wounded could not move. Dayong's mind was racing. If this were the end, he wanted to make the enemy pay dearly. At the same time, he hoped for a miracle — a sudden rainstorm to put out the flames. . . .

What satisfaction will the enemy get out of killing us? he said to himself. They think they can make us show fear. Bah, what's so frightening about death! In the old society we lived like dogs — hunger, starvation, brutality could have killed us at any time. Today, after all the things we've accomplished, why can't we die bravely?

"Fight to the end; live to the end!" Dayong crawled to the entrance of the cave, firing his pistol. With each shot an enemy fell.

At that moment San Niu and Little Cheng rushed from the cave and tried to shove the fiery pile of brushwood away from the entrance. The two youngsters leaped in and out of the flames, pushing with long sticks. Bullets rained all around

them. From the brow of the slope above the cave, the enemy showered the boys with hand grenades. They were enveloped in smoke, flames, bullets, iron fragments. But they stuck to their task with magnificent courage.

Then Little Cheng plunged into the cave, his cap and clothes smoking, his trousers wet with blood. He dropped on one knee and supported himself against the wall, as if afraid of falling.

Still firing, without turning his head, Dayong asked, "What's wrong, Little Cheng?"

"Don't worry about me, I can hold out. Watch the enemy."

Bullets spat into the wall above Dayong's left shoulder and fragments of rock flew around the cave. One of them cut Dayong's forehead. Blood trickled down his face.

"Commander," cried Little Cheng, "come over to this side."

Dayong couldn't hear a word. His eyes blazing, he was crawling forward. Little Cheng was frantic. He threw himself on Dayong. Dayong pushed him aside.

"I'm going after those bastards!"

Again Little Cheng tried to pull Dayong back, to protect him with his own body. The commander was the hope, the rock pillar of them all! Suddenly, a bullet went through the clothing beneath Dayong's arm into the chest of Little Cheng. The youngster flung up a hand and fell stretched out in front of Dayong.

Dayong trembled, his heart seared. Throwing his body across Little Cheng, his eyes sought a target.

All he could see was smoke and flames. All he could hear was the roaring fire. Suddenly, he saw San Niu run two steps towards the cave, fall, get up again, then jump back into the blaze. When his clothing began to burn, he rolled on the ground to extinguish the flames. One minute he was pushing the fiery pile of brushwood, the next minute he was picking up spinning hand grenades and tossing them back at the enemy. Moving with smooth precision, he looked huge, powerful. Dayong shouted to him, but he didn't hear.

A rock sent sailing by a bursting grenade struck Dayong's head. He leaned dizzily against the wall. His cracked lips were moving, trying to cry, "San Niu, San Niu. . . ."

Night, and limitless peace. It was very cold, but the air was fresh. Dayong drew breaths of cold air deep into his lungs. He was completely revived now. He heard someone say, "Commander."

Dayong called for Jiangguo, for Quanyou, for Changsheng. But his shouts weren't audible even to himself. Then he heard voices, voices . . . why, they were the voices of the fighters. Someone was holding water to his mouth. He sipped. How sweet, how refreshing. A big hand was patting his, and there was an arm supporting his head.

"It's me, commander — Jiangguo. I'm holding you. I'm right here with you."

"I'm right here with you" — the warmest, closest words in the world! Only someone who had been with you through thick and thin could say a thing like that. Dayong squeezed Jiangguo's big paw of a hand.

"Jiangguo," he pleaded, "be quick. Save the men in the cave — the wounded, Little Cheng, San Niu. . . ."

"Rest easy, commander, we got the wounded all out," Jiangguo replied. "San Niu is fine. Little Cheng has been badly wounded, but he's in no danger. Commander, commander, answer me, say something, commander!" . . .

Shortly before sunset, Jiangguo and his men had crept to the ridge of the eastern mountain, intending to rejoin the men in the gorge. But on reaching the mountain-top, they found the cave under fire. A few minutes later, they ran into Quanyou and his men. Jiangguo left Changsheng with one squad to hold the eastern ridge and sent another squad to pin down the enemy on the western ridge. He divided the remaining men between himself and Quanyou, and they all went charging down into the gorge. Taken by surprise, the enemy panicked, and before they had a chance to recover from their confusion, while Quanyou and his men provided cover from above the cave, Jiangguo and his fighters rushed into the cave and rescued Dayong and the wounded.

Fighting a rearguard action, the PLA men withdrew rapidly. But it wasn't until dusk that they managed to shake off the enemy.

They continued travelling deeper into the mountains.

Night, unfathomable night.

After the medical orderly finished bandaging his head, Dayong got up and leaned on the shoulder of one of the fighters. He insisted on walking, no matter how Jiangguo urged that he be carried. Dayong had his creed — however exhausted or seriously wounded a man might be, as long as he could keep erect, he could walk. And if he could walk, he could fight. Besides, said Dayong, a couple of little scratches on his head and arm — what did they amount to!

His legs were very wobbly and the first few steps he took were sheer agony. The sweat poured off him. "You can't walk," a voice inside him whispered. "Nonsense. Of course I can," another voice retorted. With every step his spirits rose — for every step was a victory over the pain of his wounds, the fatigue of his body. And with heightened spirits came strengthening of will-power. A man's will-power in battle will permit him to do things at times that astonish even himself. Dayong once jumped thirty feet from the top of a city wall, waded across a stream and knocked down two enemy soldiers with the butt of his rifle — all in one breath. Later, when the battle was over, he looked at the wall and laughed in surprise, "In a fight, where does a man get the strength?"

The ground was full of ruts and ridges, and slippery as oil in places. Stumbling along, Dayong thought back on the danger they had just come through. There's no such thing as a hopeless situation, he mused. Didn't we fight our way out? No pain, no force can defeat us. . . . Then he remembered. Tiger probably was dead. But maybe he too had fought his way through. Possible, very possible. Many miracles happened in battle.

Sorghum leaves rustled in the wind. Crickets called, short and urgent. Stars twinkled like crystal. Night, pervading stillness.

Consciousness returned to Tiger. "Where am I?" he wondered hazily, and fainted again. The star-filled sky looked down on his brave struggle, the earth heard his heavy breathing. Lying there, perhaps he had many thoughts and desires. But it seemed that these all would soon be ended.

Two or three hours later, or maybe it was only two or three minutes later, he again revived. "I'm still alive," he exulted. With an effort, he clutched the life that threatened to leave him at any moment. He tried to move. He was parched, his head ached and whirled. His body was bound with a thousand cords. Needles were stabbing into every one of his pores. A heavy weight was crushing his chest. He couldn't breathe. Blood had soaked the ground beneath him. It was sticky and wet. Cold perspiration ran down his grimy face, ran into his eyes and mouth. He wanted to wipe the

sweat away, but his arms were as heavy as logs. Every finger felt like a thick stick. His body was dull, clumsy, paralyzed.

Many exquisite pains had tortured him into wakefulness. His very blood seemed to be oppressing him. He wanted to tear his chest open. Something was burning him all over, turning him numb. He forced himself to think. Weird and peculiar pictures flashed across his mind, floating disjointed as in a dream. . . . Where was he? Could this be Zhenwu Caves? All these people must have come to attend the victory celebration. General Peng Dehuai was coming towards him, a serious affectionate light in his eyes. General Peng was offering his hand. . . . "Yes, yes, I am Tiger Wang. . . ." Then he saw Dayong, and the comrades . . . and wasn't that Quanyou? See, there was the scar on his face. . . . Warm emotions coursed through Tiger. Suddenly he realized — "I'm lying on the battlefield!" He tried to remember the fighting. But his impressions were vague, drifting. He couldn't get hold of them. . . .

Am I here alone? Where are the other comrades? I had something to do with covering a withdrawal. That's right. I bayoneted many enemy. . . . But the comrades? . . . Ah, there's the commander. . . . Tiger felt very happy. But then a cold despair settled on him. He was gripped by a terrible fear.

This bold fighter, this hero known for his steadiness, this man of steel, felt a loneliness and fear he had never experienced before. Was it because he was surrounded by corpses? No. It was not the first time he had lain among dead bodies, nor was it the tenth. Was he afraid of dying? No. It was not the first time he had vanquished death, nor was it the tenth. He was frightened because he was separated from the army.

Without the army, without his comrades, how weak a man becomes! — thought Tiger. The commissar told us once — "Men fight bravely when they're together with their comrades, because at such times they're thinking of everyone's welfare. But let some of these same men be surrounded and cut off by the enemy, and they become powerless. That's because they begin thinking of themselves." Is that the kind of man I am? No, no.

I've got to get out of here.

The will-power of courage transcends all pain. Strength seemed to flow back into Tiger. He groped for his gun. Where was it? His hand touched a broken rifle butt. He knew every mark on it.

If I can move an inch, I can move a foot, Tiger said to himself. If I can move a foot, I can travel ten. . . . Move, move, as long as I can move, I can get out of danger. But every move — what agony! And the burning thirst! Bah! What of it? He looked up at the sky for the north star to give him his bearings. How bright the stars were. But why were the heavens revolving, pulsating?

Tiger crawled and crawled. It seemed an interminable time, but he had only travelled three feet. He felt as if he had crawled for miles.

His progress was terribly slow though he was straining tensely with every muscle. After crawling half the night, he came to a patch of sand. It was a little better here — there were no sharp stones and brambles. But in the soft sand, for every two feet he advanced he slipped back one. He remembered the time the army had crossed the desert. Oh, that desert was like a sea, stretching to the horizon. If this desert were just as wide, he was finished. His heart trembled, but at once he took a grip on himself.

What do I care how big it is? I'm going to keep moving forward, forward.

Suddenly, he observed a dark hazy mass up ahead. It seemed to be rising and falling. Maybe it's men the commander has sent to find me. . . . Scenes of cheerful life in the company vividly recalled themselves to his mind. But why doesn't it move? Maybe it's an enemy sentry. . . . He listened carefully. There was no sound. He circled around to the side of the dark object. Ah, it was only a clump of weeds. Burning with thirst, he dug at the roots for water. Sure enough, he soon reached moist sand. But when he put his mouth to it and sucked, not a drop of water could he extract. Still, the wet sand was delightfully cool against his face.

He wanted to smoke. But his short pipe — where was it? It had been with Tiger before he joined the army. It had never left him for a moment, witnessing his every thought and deed. Ah, little friend — what's happened to you?

As soon as he stopped to rest, every fibre and bone in his body felt as if it were splitting with pain. His head swam. Life seemed to be slipping from him. The events of his twenty-nine years flew through his mind.

Tiger, a highly skilled mason, after living like a slave under Chiang Kai-shek and Shanxi warlord Yan Xishan, became the slave of the Japanese invaders. Was a slave a man? In 1940, he escaped and joined the 120th Division led by Red Army General He Long. He served as a scout. Wounded by a bullet through the chest, he was sent home to recuperate. In his native village, he joined the people's militia. It was then that he fell in love with Ren Dongmei, chairman of the local women's association. They were inseparable, singing love songs, wandering through the hills, whispering the words that were in their hearts . . . in the shade of the weeping willows beside the stream, talking, talking without end.

In the spring of 1943, just as they were planning their wedding, a sudden enemy attack on their region swept them apart.

For a long time Tiger had no news of Dongmei. One night he slipped back to the village but was driven out by a rain of bullets. The Japanese had built a fortified tower in the village. Tiger travelled all through the night until he reached the people's district government, concealed in a gorge. There he found Dongmei again.

She wept on his shoulder. "The enemy burned down houses. You must go back to the regular army. It needs every man we can send. If I live, I'll wait for you."

Today, Dongmei was twenty-six. She was still waiting for him.

The blood flowed wildly in Tiger's veins. The fires of life blazed brighter. Determined to get through, he set his jaw and crawled on.

Sand-laden wind swirled and whistled around him. A heavy mist covered everything. The heavens boomed and roared. Tiger closed his eyes. A thick layer of sand clung to his body. Steadily, he continued crawling. He prayed that the wind would not blow him away.

His clothing was soaked with dew. He shivered, and his dizziness left him. He looked up to find the sun high in the sky. The sand was a million shimmering dazzling particles. Could that be crops ahead? He crept forward. The sun was shining hotter by the minute. Tiger crawled into a field of sorghum.

Crops. That meant people couldn't be far away. . . . Hope gave him new energy.

The sorghum stalks rustled in the wind, dewdrops rolling from the leaves like tiny crystals. Little birds sang in the fields. The sky was a blue canopy overhead. Ah, how high it was. Wisps of clouds drifted by. Tiger wanted to chew the sweet centre of a sorghum stalk. There was moisture in it. Many's the time he'd eaten sweet sorghum pulp as a child.

He grasped a stalk with his hands. Ho! Both hands were thickly swollen. The deep gashes the bayonet blade had cut in his palms were filled with sand. His elbows and knees were raw. The sight of them made him weak. All right, he wouldn't look at them.

The neigh of horses or mules! Then tramping feet. Tiger peered through the sorghum stalks. A column of KMT soldiers was marching by. Instinctively he reached for his rifle. Where was it? He hated himself for not having picked up a hand grenade off the battlefield. He couldn't get away and he couldn't defend himself. All he could do was sit there with his eyes wide open waiting to be killed. What a spot for a man to be in! He kept his eyes riveted on the enemy, all his pain forgotten.

He saw an enemy officer strike a man across the head with a riding crop. He saw soldiers weighed down with heavy equipment, trudging forward, their backs bent like a bow . . . cooks carrying big iron cauldrons . . . pack animals laden with dismantled guns. . . . Suddenly, an enemy soldier plunged into the sorghum, looked around, then ran towards Tiger. What should he do? Tiger's whole body gave a spasmodic jerk. With bulging eyes he watched the approaching enemy. If he only had a stick! But where could he find a stick here? He wanted to jump up and meet the man in a headlong rush. But he had no command over his exhausted muscles. Good, good! His hand had found a rock.

With this, I'll make him pay a life for a life, he thought. Then he saw that the soldier was in a funk. The man threw down his rifle and stripped off his uniform — revealing civilian clothes underneath — then disappeared like a rabbit into the sorghum. A deserter! Tiger was about to crawl forward and recover the rifle when a man suddenly appeared and snatched it up. At the same moment the man discovered Tiger.

The PLA fighter's heart leaped, but immediately he became calm again. The man was a peasant. Tiger looked again. There were women crouched in the sorghum, covering their children's mouths with their hands and staring at him in amazement.

"I'm a PLA man, neighbours . . ." Tiger said faintly. The ground seemed to be melting beneath him . . . he was falling into a bottomless gorge . . . the wind whistled in his ears. . . .

10

DAYONG and the company crossed two mountains, then followed a stream towards the south. Coming around a bend, they found enemy campfires on the mountain slopes on both sides of the valley. The enemy had lit large bonfires and the mountain-tops glowed red.

Escorting some thirty prisoners and carrying their wounded, the company proceeded quietly. They walked very quickly, but without a sound. Continually, the order was passed down the column — "No talking." "No smoking."

The road twisted from a small gully into a large gorge. Now the enemy fires were on all sides. There were some campfires in the gorge, too. Looking at the terrain, Dayong was happy. He knew this place. The PLA had passed through here on the way to Yulin. Another two miles to the south-east and they'd be in Mizhi County — part of the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region.

There was a grove of wild date trees in a small mountain pass. Dayong led his men into the grove.

"We're going to break out of here," he said to Changsheng. "Check the stretchers of the badly wounded. We don't want anything to go wrong in the middle of our move. Every stretcher bearer must also carry all of his own equipment, so pick only the strongest men."

As Dayong finished explaining to the company the plan of action, Jiangguo returned from a scouting mission. He had captured an enemy soldier and he was grinning broadly.

"Commander," he said, "the prisoner knows the enemy passwords. Let him take us through. I told him if he doesn't behave I'll slaughter him. That was just to scare him. Then I gave him quite a long political lecture. He swears now his only wish is to 'serve the people'."

This is the last lap. I've got to bring my men home, thought Dayong. He turned to the fighters:

"Comrades, our border region is just ahead. Grit your teeth. We're going to break through this final barrier. We'll march one platoon ahead, one platoon in the rear, stretcher bearers and prisoners in the middle. Quanyou will command the rear guard platoon."

Men tightened their puttees, adjusted their knapsacks, checked their ammunition.

When the company was ready to set out, Jiangguo reported, "Commander, two of the wounded have died."

Dayong stood stiffly erect in the darkness. He didn't utter a sound, but kept snapping a thick stick into smaller and smaller sections. He bit his lips till the blood ran. Jiangguo thought Dayong hadn't heard him, and he repeated his announcement.

Dayong pointed to a nearby tree. "Bury them over there," he said in a low voice.

Quanyou ploughed through his assembled comrades like a madman and pushed up to Dayong.

"This is Chiang Kai-shek territory, commander. We want to bury our comrades in our own Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region." He paused for several moments, then said, "Commander, let's carry them back."

The men joined their voices in agreement.

"Commander, I'll carry one!"

"Let me carry one!"

Blood flowed from Dayong's heart, tears flowed from his eyes.

"Comrades," he cried. "Is there a place in all China where the bones of our martyrs aren't buried?" He stamped. "Here, here, bury them right here. Our comrades — one after another, they fall. They die to build a new China. For communism, they give their lives. . . . It doesn't matter where they're buried. No one will ever forget the blood our fighters have shed. No one will ever forget the hardship and pain they have suffered."

Dayong's voice was deep, vibrant. "We've endured so much hardship and pain. We've seen so many of our dear comrades fall. We — we're washing China clean with our own blood, we. . . ." Grief filled his broad chest. His heart trembled. But in his mind were sharp, clear thoughts. His voice rose fierce and strong:

"War, bitterness, blood, sweat, death — none of them can crush us. . . . Comrades! Not every fighter can live to see the world he's creating with his own hands. But without the blood of heroes, we can't end the misery of class oppression, we can't build a new society. To live for the people and to die for the people — that's all we want."

As the dead comrades were being buried, the fighters wept hot tears. Holding their rifles, they gave a final salute.

Darkness. The hour before dawn when the night is deepest.

The wind, blowing clouds of sand, swaying the trees, howled mournfully. It flapped the clothing of the silent fighters. With a bayonet, Dayong cut a piece of bark off the tree to identify it. We'll come back! he promised the departed comrades.

The fighters wiped the tears from their eyes, the blood from their faces. On their shoulders they bore history's burden, the task their country had entrusted to them, the misery of the people, their own demands for vengeance. They would continue to fight, they would continue to go forward!

Dayong's suffering heart cried out for vengeance. Although he couldn't distinguish the fighters clearly in the dark, he could almost see their thin sun-blackened faces, their bleeding feet.

"Forward, march," he said quietly.

Not a man stirred.

"Forward, march!"

The company set out. Jiangguo walked with drawn pistol beside the prisoner he had captured. Whenever they were challenged by a guard, the man sang out the password. In this way, the company traversed several small gullies. About three in the morning, they reached a road running through a wide gorge.

The fighters pressed forward at a trot, the shuffling of their feet blending with the rushing of the stream beside the road.

Ahead, at a crossroad, the enemy had built a huge bonfire. When the company was only a few dozen yards from the crossroad, enemy soldiers near the bonfire began shooting at them. Immediately, shots rang out on all sides; flares and signal rockets were set off.

Dayong glanced around quickly. The mountains on both sides of the gorge were covered with KMT soldiers. A pistol in one hand, a hand grenade in the other, he gave his command:

"Hand grenades ready! Forward — run!"

They dashed past the crossroad, climbed a mountain, and left the enemy behind.

The sky was quite bright by the time Quanyou and his rear guard platoon caught up. The company proceeded openly through a mountain ravine.

For the past few days Dayong had said little and his temper was bad. He felt much better now. The company had fought its way through thousands of enemy troops. Battling day and night, they had proven that the PLA was unbeatable. Dayong couldn't have been prouder if he were leading an army of a million heroes. He looked at his men. Their ranks were not straight, their feet were dragging and out of step, their uniforms were a mess . . . but everything about them, from their ragged uniforms to their wizened faces and blood-soaked bandages, bespoke their courage.

They had returned to the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region.

The fighters recognized every tree, every blade of grass. Even the brown bare hills, devoid of any vegetation, they viewed with warm affection.

Birds sang in the trees. A few magpies, trilled, flipped their long tails, then flew directly south-east. The crops were poor this year, but how fresh and green they appeared to the PLA men! Waving in the breeze, the crops seemed to be beckoning to them. The waters of the stream were a tumbling muddy yellow. Probably there had been a heavy rain in the upper reaches. Not very deep, the stream flowed swiftly, twisting into large whirlpools, then unfolding and rushing on, tossing up a froth of white bubbles along its edges. On the inundated banks, only the tops of green grass could be seen, struggling in the waves. Weeping willows, their branches trailing in the water, were drenched with leaping froth which dripped back into the stream.

How beautiful were the border region's hills and valleys.

Dayong unbuttoned his tunic and wiped the sweat from his chest. He sighed comfortably. If the stream weren't so turbid, he would have taken the whole company in for a bath.

Some of the men began to whistle; others sang as they marched. But now that they were back in the border region, many of them relaxed. The line of march stretched long, as fighters straggled behind. A few simply sat down to rest.

Dayong walked back to two of them. "Keep going, comrades," he said.

"I'm starved, commander," replied the first. "I can't go another step. My legs. . . ."

"Commander," said the other, "just look at my feet, my legs, the wound in my chest! . . . I'm worn out, commander. This chest wound. . . . I know I'll never get back to our army. . . ."

Dayong's own legs were heavy as lead, and they itched furiously. But, listening to the men, he forgot his pain. His heart went out to them. Supporting one by the arm, he said:

"Come on, comrades. I know you. You can march!"

Yaocheng and Liuwa marched on.

Limping, Liuwa winced with every step, and each time he winced, Dayong's heart contracted with pain. He knew what the boy was suffering.

"I'll carry you, Liuwa."

"I'm making you tired enough, leaning on you."

Besides supporting Liuwa, Dayong was also carrying all his equipment. After they had travelled a few hundred yards, Dayong was drenched with sweat. At a time like this, even a needle would have felt like a hundred catties.

"Let's rest, commander," Liuwa urged. "You see, those two comrades have fallen far behind us again."

While Liuwa squatted by the roadside, Dayong signalled the two fighters to catch up. They staggered up and dropped on the ground beside him.

"I'm dead tired, commander."

"Commander, I can't march, no matter what you say."

Dayong's feet felt as if they were being scalded in boiling water. He took off his shoes. The men caught their breaths at the sight of his soles — cut, swollen, bleeding. He quickly turned around so as not to let the men see.

"Your feet are in terrible shape, commander," said Liuwa.

"It's nothing."

"Nothing! About yourself you're always saying — 'It's nothing!' "

Another fighter tore a strip from his tunic. "Commander, let me bandage your feet."

Dayong put his shoes on and stood up. "We're fighting a revolution," he said. "How can we win it if we don't shed a little sweat and blood? Give me your equipment, comrades, and let's be going. We mustn't fall behind."

The fighters scrambled to their feet. One of them supported Liuwa.

"March on, commander. As long as there's a breath left in our bodies, we'll go with you to the ends of the earth!" The men continued forward.

Not far ahead, they observed four women carrying something. A few children with water jugs trailed in the rear. When the children noticed Dayong and his men approaching, they ran, shouting, towards the women, who immediately hurried into a ravine.

Suspicious, Dayong trotted ahead to have a look. The women were standing together, but the object they had been carrying had disappeared. Dayong hailed them:

"What are you womenfolk doing out here?"

The women stared at his filthy uniform, caked with blood and grime.

"What are you looking at? I'm a member of our army."

A middle-aged woman came forward a few steps. "Are you really?"

"Of course, I am. Don't you see this grey uniform?"

The women crowded around him affectionately. One of them wept:

"Aiya, the big gorge over there is full of enemy troops down from Yulin! . . ."

The middle-aged woman said, "Comrade, we've got one of our wounded here!"

Startled, Dayong ran over to see. There in the tall grass, lying on a wooden door, was a wounded soldier. His face was swollen and waxy; there was blood on his chin and neck. But his closed eyelids seemed to smile. Dayong dropped on his knees and embraced him. Cheek to cheek, he cried:

"Tiger! Tiger!"

Tiger was not able to reply.

Dayong put his hand under Tiger's clothing. The wounded man's heart was beating firmly. But there seemed to be something on his stomach. Dayong opened the clothing and looked. Tiger was wrapped in strips of cloth, beneath which were some kind of soft lumpy objects.

"This comrade was brought to my house," the middle-aged woman explained. "He told me to smear his wounds with the pulp of pumpkin. He said he cured wounds many times that way during the war against the Japanese. I did what he asked."

"How did he get to your place?"

"We live about seven miles north-east of here," another woman said. "Right on the border between the Red and the White areas. Last night at the first cock's crow, five or six peasants from the White area carried him in. 'We've been travelling all day and all night,' they said. 'Can you get him back to our army?' Hmph! I said, 'We don't belong in this Red area if we can't!' . . . ."

Chapter Five

Shajiadian

1

THE gurgling waters of the Wuding River flowed steadily eastward. On its banks at lamp-lighting time there was no lowing of cattle and bleating of sheep, no boisterous cries of children at play, no romantic love-ballads sung loud and clear by grown-ups returning from their day's labour. — No; today the crack-crack of rifles filled the air!

Night and the furies of war descended together on the Wuding River.

Somewhere around midnight the night of August 15, 1947 in a cave north of the walled town of Zhenchuanbao, the commanding general of the column was scanning a map by candlelight. He knew very well that our armies in the north-west had to switch immediately from the defensive to the offensive, and that in taking this big step they would encounter exceptional complications and dangers.

The general set the candle down on a window-sill and began to pace the floor softly. For two days and two nights he hadn't shut his eyes and they were inflamed from lack of sleep. His haggard face was tinged with yellow.

A staff officer stood leaning against the wall, his head slightly drooping, asleep on his feet.

Again the general took up the candle and examined the map intently.

Brigadier Chen and Yang Kewen, the brigade's political commissar, came in and stood behind the general. Pushing his cap forward, Chen lightly scratched the back of his head. Kewen stared off into a corner, immersed in thought. Both men were parched with thirst, exhausted and anxious. They brought in with them the excitement and tension of commanders on the field of battle.

What had happened was this: Hu Zongnan's Thirty-sixth Division, which had been reorganized into an army, after relieving the KMT troops in Yulin and entering the city, quickly turned south in a drive against our forces.

Our North-west Field Army retreated from the outskirts of Yulin, intending to take up positions near Gueidebao, about thirteen miles to the south, and there come to grips with the Thirty-sixth. But the enemy, slippery as an eel, detoured around the town and went to Yuhebao, further south along the highway. The night before, our forces had made a forced march in the dark over the mountains to wait for the enemy on the highway between Yuhebao and Zhenchuanbao. But again the wily Thirty-sixth got away.

From the time the North-west Field Army had commenced advancing on Yulin in the beginning of August until today, it was exactly fifteen days. In this period they had been compelled to march through deserts, buffeted by wind and rain. They were hungry, cold and tired. They wanted nothing more than to be able to get at the enemy, to swallow that Thirty-sixth Division down in one gulp!

"We've got to hit them tonight," Chen and the commissar were thinking. Obviously that was what the general was working on. Their tension and anxiety shone in their eyes, but they stood quietly, afraid to break the general's train of thought. Kewen coughed softly and the general turned around. He warmly shook them both by the hand and told his orderly to bring them some drinking water.

"That Thirty-sixth Division is pretty proud of itself," said the commissar.

"Proud?" cried Chen, bitterly. "We're going to grab that tiger by the tail!"

The general looked at the two men calmly. "There's no need to be upset, comrades. We've pulled the enemy down to the banks of the Wuding. That's an important victory. Viewing the military situation in the country as a whole, we've done something of real significance — even if we have had quite a few hard days. The thing to do now is figure out how to settle with the Thirty-sixth."

"We know that pulling them down here is a victory, but. . . ." Chen and Kewen both were thinking; at the same time they could sense there was something more which the general was not able to tell them. That being the case, they refrained from asking any questions. Yet they couldn't help wondering: Was it connected with our Shanxi forces preparing to cross the Yellow River in a thrust at Xian? Or was our army in Shandong preparing a surprise move of some sort?

"Have the troops pitched camp?" asked the general.

"Pitched camp?" exclaimed Chen. "They're all gathered in the valley below, waiting for orders to march!"

The general opened his cigarette case and proffered it to Chen and Kewen. After they each took a cigarette, he took one himself and tapped it sharply against the case.

"Right," he said. "We not only should be prepared to march, but, if the reports our scouts just gave us are correct, we also should be prepared to fight." To commissar Kewen he said, "Go back and get the troops ready. If our intelligence is correct and General Peng gives the order to attack, we'll have to set out at once so as to catch up with the enemy and hit them at dawn."

"Field Army Headquarters is right behind your rear guard troops," he informed Chen. "General Peng Dehuai is there. You report the situation to him and see what orders he has for you. The situation is this: Today we were waiting for the enemy between Yuhebao and Zhenchuanbao, but instead of following the highway they circled west, crossed the Wuding and advanced towards Dangjiacha on the south bank. We expect they'll want to cross back again at dawn and take Zhenchuanbao."

"I understand all that," said the brigadier.

"But that's not the problem." The general pointed at the map on the wall. "Our scouts just reported that enemy general Zhong Song is leading the headquarters command of the Thirty-sixth plus two battalions along the *north* side of the river towards Zhenchuanbao, while two regiments are covering them from the south side. We're not sure yet whether this news is reliable and we've sent out another mission to check on it. Anyhow, you report to General Peng. Perhaps he has some more recent information." The general again looked at the map. "If our original reports were accurate and General Peng decides that we fight, then we have to get to positions north of Zhenchuanbao and strike at Zhong Song before sunrise. However, there's still another question. Assuming that we can fight this battle, what advantage will we gain from it? . . ."

Again the general paced the floor. Finally, he said, "You report the situation to General Peng. Whatever he decides — that's what we'll do."

Chen and Kewen exchanged excited glances. It was like suddenly seeing water and grass in the middle of a march through the desert.

Kewen said, "I think if our scouts have got their information straight we're sure to fight. Unless we seize this opportunity, the enemy will be in Zhenchuanbao by tomorrow. That would be a real nuisance."

"We ought to fight," exclaimed Chen. "If we do a good job, maybe we'll grab old Zhong Song himself."

The general glanced at his watch. "It's already one o'clock. We haven't got much time. Chen, you'd better get over there in a hurry. Oh, yes, take a staff officer along. If General Peng decides to attack, have the staff officer draw a layout of how he wants us to deploy our troops and bring it back to me immediately. We'll prepare accordingly."

Taking a staff officer and a mounted messenger with him, the brigadier jumped on his horse and set off.

They urged their mounts along a small path across the river flats.

Chen knew that although the enemy were stupid, they were also very fierce.

The enemy's main force of seven brigades of their First and Twenty-ninth Armies, containing nearly 70,000 men, was rolling north like a juggernaut along the Xianyang-Yulin Highway, preparing to co-ordinate with Hu Zongnan's Thirty-sixth Division advancing south from Yulin and compress the North-west Field Army into a small area in Jiaxian County, north of the city of Mizhi, and there destroy it. In other words, the North-west Field Army, which was quite small, was to be encircled by more than a hundred thousand enemy troops.

It was a serious, dangerous situation. Although Chen did not know it, in another two or three days the enemy was going to occupy all of the county seats and most of the territory of the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region. The stretch of land running from Mizhi north to the Great Wall and from the Yellow River west to the Wuding (about seven miles south to north and nine miles east to west) was to be the only place where the North-west Field Army could operate freely. The Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and Chairman Mao Zedong were also to be confined within this area.

Chen jiggled his horse's reins and kicked it into a trot. Things don't look so good, he said to himself. But the enemy's savage drive to encircle and annihilate our army filled him with anger and contempt. "They've got it all figured out, eh? Well, we'll see about that!" he said aloud.

"What did you say?" the startled staff officer asked him.

"I said, 'We'll see about that!' " Chen replied.

The mystified officer requested clarification.

"I said the enemy isn't going to get away with anything," declared Chen. "In fact we're going to make them sorry they were ever born, damn sorry!"

It seemed to Chen he had more than enough courage and confidence to meet the enemy. But when it came to conceiving a plan of action that would turn the crisis into victory, he could think of nothing concrete. He pinned all his hopes on one idea: Strike tomorrow at dawn and nab Zhong Song; then we'll see.

It was now one-thirty in the morning. In another three hours the attack would begin. Chen's ears rang with the general's parting words, "We haven't got much time."

The brigadier prodded his horse into a gallop. The clattering hoofs broke the stillness of the night, iron horse shoes striking sparks on the stony path.

2

CHEN dismounted at a point along the river flats and handed his reins to the messenger. Together with the staff officer, after responding to the challenge of a sentry, he climbed to a ramshackle little village half-way up the mountain.

He was about to see the commanding general of the entire North-west. Chen could hardly control his excitement. He was very tense.

Chen asked the staff officer to wait outside, and followed a North-west Field Army Headquarters' aide into the cave where General Peng was living.

An orderly lit some candles, illuminating the interior of the cave.

The cave was blackened by the smoke of years of cooking fires. Military maps hung on the wall. Beside the window stood an old table on which piles of documents rested. Jars and jugs that were part of the peasant owner's household utensils lined the window-sill, and a dog-eared primary school textbook was rolled up on the sill's corner. In the rear left corner of the room were a crude vat, a grain bin of woven matting and some farm implements.

It was so quiet you could have heard a pin drop.

Chen was surprised. To the east was the Yellow River, to the west the Wuding; over a hundred thousand enemy troops were converging from the north and south. A timid person would be scared stiff. Even a man like himself, with seventeen years of battle experience, felt depressed. Yet here the atmosphere was entirely peaceful and serene.

General Peng was lying on some straw spread on the floor to the rear of the cave, covered with a ragged overcoat. He stood up when Chen entered and draped the coat over his shoulders.

Chen saluted and scanned the general's face.

General Peng nodded slightly, then shook his hand with a strong and friendly grip. He looked robust, honest, amiable.

"What did you want to see me about?" General Peng asked slowly, in a low voice.

"Our column commander wants me to report our situation to you and await your orders."

General Peng's eyes gazed at Chen steadily from beneath black, bushy brows. He was as simple and modest as any peasant. Quiet and retiring, he stood looking at Chen thoughtfully.

Then he picked up a lighted candle and walked over to the wall map. "What is the situation?" he asked Chen.

"Our scouts report that two enemy regiments are advancing along the south bank of the Wuding. On the north, near our positions, Zhong Song is with his division headquarters company and two battalions. They were observed tonight at midnight moving down the highway, preparing to occupy Zhenchuanbao at dawn."

General Peng listened in silence, gazing at the candle flame.

"Our column commander has instructed me to ask for your orders. If you decide that we fight, our column is ready to strike at the enemy force on the north bank of the Wuding. If we do it well, perhaps we can capture Zhong Song."

His left hand holding the candle, his right hand behind his back, General Peng said nothing. His shadow loomed huge and motionless on the ceiling of the cave. Hot candle wax dripped on to his hand, but he seemed totally unaware of it.

After Chen finished making his report, the general turned to concentrate on the map.

Chen glanced at his watch and at once became very anxious. It was already two o'clock. If they were going to fight, the troops would have to go into battle at five. But before that they would have to march, take up positions. . . . He could almost hear the luminous dial on his wrist shouting, "Tick! Tick! Tick!" And every tick was like a fist pounding against his heart. He wished he could grab time and hold it still. But General Peng's serious, calm manner seemed to be cautioning him: Be patient, don't get excited.

The brigadier examined General Peng's profile. He had aged in the past four or five months. There was a touch of grey at his temples, and the wrinkles in the corners of his eyes had increased.

"So Zhong Song with his division headquarters company and two battalions is on the north side of the river. Now that is news," he said to Chen. He thought a moment, then shook his head slightly. "Impossible," he said, and went back to his pondering.

After a while, he spoke again. "Maybe it is possible, at that. Zhong Song is a conceited bird. He won't listen to Liu Kan." General Peng looked at Chen and added, "They're both always trying to show their 'independent spirit'." The trace of a grin crossed the general's face.

General Peng sent for one of his section chiefs and asked, "Any recent enemy intelligence?"

"Nothing coming in over the air. We're continuing to monitor." The section chief withdrew.

Chen was impressed by the quiet efficiency of the men surrounding General Peng.

"If that's the case. . . ." The general put down the candle and, looking at the map, began counting on his fingers. Half a minute later he said, "The enemy on the north bank must have well over a thousand men. If we attack and they retreat towards the river, their troops on the south bank are sure to send them help. Under those circumstances, even though we could inflict losses on the enemy and take seven or eight hundred prisoners, we'd suffer two or three hundred casualties ourselves. Another possibility is that the enemy would pull back as soon as we attacked. We wouldn't be able to come to grips with them and we'd be revealing our positions."

Turning to face Chen, the general continued, "Once we revealed where we are, the enemy's main force of seven brigades would come swarming across from the south side of the river and they'd all join together in a tight phalanx that we couldn't sink our teeth into. Besides, at the moment, we're short of grain. So no matter how you look at it, even though we have a chance to fight, right now it would be better not to."

What! Not fight? Chen thought, very disappointed.

Observing his expression, the general asked him amicably, "What do you think? Should we fight this battle or not?"

Chen was rather embarrassed. "Whatever you decide, general, we'll act accordingly," he replied uneasily. "It's just that the men have been itching to fight for a long time. . . ."

General Peng shook his head. "If you ask me, I say: No."

The general placed the candle on the table, put his hands behind his back and slowly walked a few paces. "Perhaps some of you are wondering why we don't attack with the enemy right under our noses." He gave Chen a kindly glance. "A commander, especially a high-ranking commander, must learn to take an over-all view of tactical and strategic situations. He mustn't get too anxious for the sake of some partial advantage. On the contrary, he must be patient, force the enemy to take a misstep and then defeat them."

Watching his own feet as he walked, General Peng waited for Chen to say something. When the brigadier made no reply, he walked over to the map and pointed at the area between the Yellow River and the Wuding, drawing a circle with his finger.

"We've concentrated here because we want to give the enemy the impression that we're intending to cross the Yellow River. We must understand their psychology, increase their illusions and foster their vanity."

Chen thought of the column's many quick and secret changes of position in recent days, the strict security measures, the ruses to fool the enemy. Now he could see that they had a special significance, that General Peng was planning a large-scale battle. The brigadier drove all thoughts of an attack at dawn from his mind. He recalled how before every battle General Peng always called a meeting of brigade officers and above to discuss tactics. The general would point at the map and offer several possible alternatives, explaining the advantages and shortcomings of each. His talks invariably were simple, clear and to the point. He would then request that the officers give their own opinions, while he sat listening quietly and thoughtfully. His honest, modest demeanour gave you the feeling that he didn't want to draw attention to himself.

Now his eyes swung from the map to Chen's face. "The enemy are advancing with a great swagger," he said. "At first glance they look quite powerful. As a matter of fact it's precisely this sort of action which proves that Chiang Kai-shek's crowd goes into battle with their coffins on their backs." And General Peng added, " Once they start to topple, they'll never be able to stand firm again."

After making a detailed analysis of the enemy's situation, the general summed up. "Their scheme is obvious. They want to squeeze us in pincers between the Wuding and Yellow Rivers and wipe us out." He pointed at the map. "You see. Tomorrow their Thirty-sixth Division will enter Zhenchuanbao. Their First and Twenty-ninth Armies have already taken the city of Suide today. If we don't fight now, the enemy main force coming up from the south is sure to divide into three columns." As he spoke, he weighed every word carefully.

In a slow, quiet voice, he continued, "If the enemy is cautious, one column will advance from Suide up the Xianyang-Yulin Highway, go through Mizhi and join the Thirty-sixth Division at Zhenchuanbao. Then they will turn east and march through Shajiadian and Wulongbao into Jiaxian County." The general moved his finger to point east of the Wuding River and the highway. "Another column will go north-east from Suide, also towards Jiaxian County, but passing through Jizhendian. The third column will go east from Suide to Yihezhen, then follow north along the west bank of the Yellow River in a direct drive on Jiaxian County. The enemy think that this division of their forces is the best way to destroy us. But while they are rushing around, divided, we will be tightly united and in hiding, waiting for our chance to strike at one of their columns. How does that method sound to you?"

Chen smiled. It was remarkable how General Peng could anticipate the enemy's moves in such detail. Now he knew what was meant by "maintaining the initiative." Even when you seemed to have ended up in a blind alley, if you could quickly grasp the initiative in battle, you were sure to win. On the other hand if you remained always on the defensive, reacting only to the other fellow's moves, even though you

had a vast army at your command and the whole world to move around in, you would be beaten decisively.

General Peng repeated his question, "Does that seem a good way to wage this campaign?"

The brigadier was embarrassed. "Excellent," he replied, and he wondered: Why does the general keep asking me that?

"You can attack my method — in whole or in part," said General Peng. "The thinking of any one individual is always very limited, and often not too reliable," he explained. "Whenever I think of a plan of battle, I also try to knock holes in it. And I ask others to do the same. In that way, the plan I finally arrive at is relatively correct and mature."

He walked over to the telephone, handed the candle to Chen, twirled the crank and asked for Chen's column commander. But the line had not yet been laid, due to the distance between the two headquarters. After telling the communications centre to connect him with two other column commanders, General Peng lightly put down the phone.

"If, as we expect, the enemy divides into three columns, we'll be able to fight a big battle. If we fight it well, we'll turn the tide in the North-west and be able to go into counter-offensive operations."

By then General Peng's call was routed through to the column commanders, and he again carefully went over the whole ground of what he had just discussed with the brigadier. As to whether or not Zhong Song was on the north bank of the Wuding with two battalions, General Peng said in his opinion it was not possible. But suppose it were true, the general went on, would it be better to fight or not to fight? If we did fight, what should be the next step? Again General Peng examined the various possibilities and possible tactics. Concluding his talk with the first column commander, he then spoke to the second column commander — patiently, serious, discussing every detail. He sounded more like an officer chatting with his men about their work and study while sitting around the fire of a winter's night than the commanding general who bore the whole burden of the North-west campaign on his shoulders.

When the general's calls were completed, Chen returned the candle to him. General Peng observed the wart on Chen's hand.

"Ah, you've got a 'monkey' there," said the general. He pointed to the corner of his own eye. "I've got one here too. You remove it and it grows right back again. Stubborn little fiend."

The brigadier pressed his lips together to hold back his laughter.

Outside the door of the cave someone shouted, "Report!"

"Come in," said General Peng quietly.

A young officer entered. He evidently had travelled a long distance in a great hurry. Panting, he wiped the perspiration from his flushed face. His uniform was spattered with mud.

"The situation is exactly as you predicted," he said to General Peng. "Because the enemy is afraid we'll cut into them, today, after passing Yuhebao, they crossed over to the south side of the Wuding River. They are now about five miles from Zhenchuanbao, between Dangjiacha and Lower Salt Flats. They seem to be preparing to recross the Wuding after dawn and take Zhenchuanbao." The young officer pointed at Chen. "The report this comrade has brought is incorrect, due to a confusion between two villages with similar sounding names, one on the north and the other on the south side of the river."

General Peng showed no particular satisfaction at this confirmation of his analysis.

Chen, however, was thrilled. He could sense the scope of the coming victory. It was a turning point, and an extremely complicated and subtle one at that. A powerful enemy was pressing closer, step by step, loudly proclaiming that they were going to wind up the North-west campaign in one battle. Our forces were in a very dangerous spot. But war's wheel of fortune was about to turn. The enemy would drop like the mercury in a thermometer during a sudden cold wave.

Yes, in that sense you might say victory was assured even before the battle began.

Turning to the officer, General Peng asked, "Anything else new?"

The young man brought out a small notebook, glanced at one of its pages and said, "The peasants handed over to us five enemy spies they had captured. Questioning again confirmed enemy aerial reconnaissance has been reporting that the administrative personnel, their families and the students we have massed at the fording points of the Yellow River near the county seat of Jiaxian are the main force of our army."

General Peng brought a tray of documents from beside the wall map and placed it on the table. Then he went through its contents one by one — intelligence reports, telegrams — reading each one carefully. Where the writing was small and hard to distinguish, he carried the paper closer to the lamp and squinted at it.

After a time, he again faced the wall map, and counted on the fingers of his left hand. He sat motionless, deep in thought, for several minutes. Then he neatly arranged the papers on his desk into piles, rose and began pacing the floor.

"The enemy commanders," he said, "especially Zhong

Song, because they were able to relieve Yulin, are very proud of themselves, and they look down on our army. As a result they're misled by partial or false information, believe their own wishful thinking, divide their forces and launch wild drives. Armies led by men of that sort have always met defeat." General Peng smiled scornfully. Looking at Chen and the young officer, he added, "In any set of circumstances, there is always something we can learn. We can profit from the enemy's mistakes."

When General Peng's eyes fell on him again, the young officer, still holding his little notebook, leafed through quickly to another part of it and continued his report:

"In addition to their aerial reconnaissance, the enemy have another source of military intelligence — they question men who had been our prisoners and whom we recently released, especially officers." The young man turned another few pages rapidly. "Last night we let five officer prisoners go at a suitable place. Before doing so, we pretended to let slip the news that a part of our army had already crossed the Yellow River."

"The effectiveness of that method is limited," observed the general. "Experienced military men can see through it."

"That's true," the young officer agreed, gazing at General Peng fondly.

His hands behind his back, the general walked up and back a few paces. "Its effectiveness is limited," he repeated. He seemed to like the phrase, and savoured its meaning.

The young officer saluted and went out.

Looking at the map, General Peng again counted on his fingers. Then, squinting at the flame of the candle, he said, "Chiang Kai-shek made a serious tactical blunder by occupying Yanan. Now we're going to make him pay for it. . . ."

It was about four-thirty in the morning now, and the candle

flame flickered as a light breeze brought the fragrance of the grass and flowers on the mountainside. The night was dark and deep. All was quiet.

"Report!" cried a voice at the cave's door. A communications man entered and handed General Peng a telegram. The general placed it on the table, but the man said insistently, "That's a message from our Ninth Column."

General Peng scanned the telegram carefully and his face became thoughtful. This was the fifth message Ninth Column had sent that night.

Chen was startled. "Ninth Column?" he said to himself. Wasn't that the code symbol for our Central Committee organizations? Could it be a telegram from Chairman Mao? The brigadier's heart pounded with excitement. Raising his head abruptly, he found General Peng looking at him.

"Do you have any further orders, general?" he asked. "May I go?"

General Peng nodded. "You may." He shook hands with Chen. "The Thirty-sixth Division can't get away from us. We're going to come to grips with it very soon." The general walked Chen to the door. "You can tell our fighters," he smiled, "Hu Zongnan is sorry our army isn't up to full strength. So he's going to send us more soldiers and arms and equipment."

"Very good, General Peng!"

Wrapped up in his thoughts, Chen let his horse pick its own way along the river flats. Several times the staff officer asked him in a low voice, "Are we going to fight this battle or not, brigadier?" but Chen didn't even hear him.

The river water gurgled in its twisting course through the mountain valley. It was cool in the early hours before dawn, and the air was fresh and clear.

The horse swung into a rhythmic trot. Chen's mind was full of new impressions and ideas, but because he had been so stirred, for the moment he couldn't sort them all out. He felt excited, confident. He had learned a great deal.

He gathered his reins and the horse broke into a gallop. After several minutes, Chen relaxed his pressure on the bit and the lively sorrel again settled into its mincing trot.

The mountain valley was dotted with sentries who broke the stillness from time to time with their sharp challenges. Soldiers cradling their rifles slept out in the open on both banks of the river. Cooks with cauldrons strapped to their backs slept sitting upright, snoring lustily, their heads drooping against their chests. Commanders of all ranks and political officers walked slowly along the sidelines. Everything manifested that all were ready to go, to fight.

As his horse wandered along a small stream, Chen listened to the heavy breathing of the men.

They're very tired, mused the brigadier. But he knew that when the order was given, they would rise immediately and throw themselves into the battle. . . .

He remembered what General Peng had said: The enemy would divide into three columns and we would fight a big battle. If we fought well, the situation in the North-west would change and we could take the offensive. A fiery strength flowed through Chen's veins. Although he had not shut his eyes all night, he was not the least bit sleepy.

In the distance a dog barked; roosters began to crow.

"It will soon be dawn," the brigadier said to himself.

Turning his head, he cried to the staff officer and the mounted messenger, "Keep up with me." He kicked his heels into his horse's ribs and the animal broke into a run.

The drumming hoof beats rang loud and sharp in the quiet of the night.

Shortly before daybreak Chen arrived back at column headquarters. He was about to give his report when the general informed him:

"The line has been put through. General Peng has told me everything in detail over the phone."

Cigarette butts littered the floor in front of the wall map. On the window-sill beside the map were three or four burnt-out candles. Evidently the column commander had been working at the map all night. He was still at it, holding a candle, a lit cigarette in his mouth.

Has there been another big change? Chen wondered.

The column commander glanced at the window. Darkness was melting away and dawn was creeping in. The general blew out the candle.

"The Party's Central Committee and Chairman Mao are seven miles from here, near a village called Liangjiacha. Originally I wanted you to send a battalion under the command of a courageous, quick-thinking officer of regimental rank to serve as their guards. But now we're going to fight; we can't spare any of our combat units. I've dispatched the guards company of the column with instructions to seek out Comrade Ren Bishi — because if Chairman Mao hears that we've sent men he's sure to send them back. He'd never let us pull troops out of battle to protect him."

"But with the guards company gone, what protection is there for the column's administrative units?" queried Chen. "Why not let me send some men up here. Or perhaps I could take a unit over to relieve the guards company and let them come back to column."

The column commander laughed. "What for? You think the enemy would dare attack our administrative corps? I suppose you're hoping to get a close look at Chairman Mao. Well, in another few days you'll probably get your chance."

3

LATE on the night of the fifteenth, the reorganized Thirty-sixth Division of Hu Zongnan lay encamped, near Lower Salt Flats on the south bank of the Wuding about five miles from Zhenchuanbao.

Not far away was a small village. In the centre of the village stood a large compound. Entering its gate, you were confronted with a neat row of five handsome cave-dwellings. Originally the residence of a landlord, later it had been turned over to the peasants. Now it was occupied by Zhong Song, commanding general of the Thirty-sixth Division, and other high-ranking division officers.

On a wall in the centre cave hung a military map. A number of staff officers stood before it, discussing the location of various units of the North-west Field Army. From their assured tones, it was plain that they were checking the positions merely as a formality.

Zhong Song sat lazily on an army cot with the air of a man who has eaten his fill. A few officers sat near him on small stools. One belched frequently. The floor was covered with cigarette butts and empty cigarette packs. A meeting had just been concluded.

Picking his teeth, Zhong Song stood up. "That Yulin wine isn't bad, though it's not well known."

"True," a tall officer agreed. "I hear that they make excellent rugs there too, but we had no time to see for ourselves, we turned south so fast."

Zhong Song walked over to the map, glanced carelessly at the staff officers, strolled around. The fingers of his left hand lightly strummed the air. He was pleased with himself, pleased with the staff officers at the map — he even found living in the cave quite comfortable.

A short officer about forty with a heavily lined face, observing the interest with which Zhong Song regarded the cave, was quick to go along with his mood. "These caves have their advantages, in spite of being so primitive," he remarked. "They're warm in winter and cool in summer."

Zhong Song had no interest in talking about caves. "Have you all seen General Liu's telegram?" he asked. "Quite a dissertation! I'm very annoyed with him. He made a long speech at a meeting in Yanan, criticizing me in front of everybody for talking too much. The fact is, I have good reason to talk. I have always opposed, and still oppose, that craven fear of the enemy which pervades our high command headquarters."

Zhong Song sneered. "Certain people without even four or five brigades they can call their own, have, by luck, managed to climb to high positions. They're always afraid to move — be it only a mile or two. They can't fight! . . . This fear of the Communist armies has practically become a contagious disease. It's absolutely shameful!" His jowls shook with anger.

The officers sitting around Zhong Song looked at him with respectful interest. They knew he was aiming his shafts at men like General Liu Kan. Some murmured their agreement; others manifested it by gazing at him with earnest admiration.

The short, wrinkle-faced officer tried to steer the conversation away from the subject of Hu Zongnan's headquarters command and Liu Kan. "The way our single division crossed the desert, relieved Yulin and crumpled the Communist army's resistance was simply unprecedented," he declaimed.

"General Zhong Song's superlative leadership and iron determination were the decisive factors in this military success," another officer added.

"True," Zhong Song agreed pompously, "the victory at Yulin has been a lesson to those who have been sending the cause of Master Hu Zongnan to its grave. At the same time it has given the entire country a new method for dealing with the Communist bandits. Our colleagues often say it is very difficult to anticipate the moves of the Communist armies — they're too mercurial. That way of speaking contains an element of exaggeration. Lightning speed is the essence of the art of warfare — that is common military knowledge. But the generals among us who have mastered that skill are infinitesimally small in number. When we relieved Yulin, our lightning speed, and only our lightning speed, was able to knock the Communist army — known for its quickness — completely off balance, and struck fear into its heart."

He raised his eyes to the ceiling. "If we can hurt or destroy the Communist Party's Central Committee and its army, the effect on the fighting throughout the country will, of course, be enormous. I hear Generalissimo Chiang is flying to Yanan tomorrow to lead this campaign personally together with Master Hu. Strive to the utmost, gentlemen! The great day has come."

"The old man is going to Yanan?" cried the tall officer. "Excellent! General, we rely entirely on you.... We really are in an enviable position. Under General Zhong Song's leadership our division has been praised by Master Hu time and again. And when we relieved Yulin and changed the whole picture in the North-west, Generalissimo Chiang issued a special order of commendation. If in the next two or three days we can clear the Communist forces out of northern Shaanxi, our dear General Zhong Song will indeed be one of the great men in our land!"

"The old man and Master Hu have always had a very high opinion of me," Zhong Song admitted. "But except for throwing myself into my work with an ardent heart, I really have little else to my credit. . . ."

The short officer rubbed his hands together and paced the floor rapidly, deeply moved by Zhong Song's modesty. "Our general's splendid contributions to our Kuomintang party and to the nation are there for all with eyes to see," he cried. He thought for a moment, then added, "I have said it more than once — The greatest accomplishments of our division are not in the past but in the future, the very immediate future...." With short steps he pattered over to the map and pointed at the district around Jiaxian. "General, according to our first intelligence report, the Communist Party Central Committee is near Jiaxian. The main force of their army, unable to take Yulin, exhausted and short of grain, buried its mountain guns and other heavy equipment in the hills, and has fled towards the Yellow River fording points. . . . Our second intelligence report showed that, having suffered heavy casualties at Yulin, the so-called main force of the Communist army has already begun to cross the river, leaving only a unit about three thousand men operating in the district north of Mizhi. . . ."

Zhong Song, his back to the officer and the map, didn't bother to turn around. He waved his hand in a gesture indicating he knew all that.

"That wire from Master Hu put it very clearly," said the tall officer, and he read aloud: *There are elements of contradiction in the two intelligence reports. But the statements that the Communist army was unable to conquer Yulin, that it suffered enormous losses and that it acts according to our initiative, are entirely correct.... If the enemy is already crossing the river, our army should attack them while they are still in the process. If they have not yet begun to cross, we should force them to fight with their backs against the water.*

Thus our army will achieve military accomplishments that will startle the nation.

Seated on the army cot, Zhong Song posed thoughtfully with his hand supporting his chin. He heaved a long sigh. "We advance boldly and win the respect of our brother armies. But what do they know of how we expend our heart's blood? If we make the smallest misstep, the enemy is sure to take advantage of it. Many painful experiences prove that. You have to be bold and fierce when you fight the Communists, but you also have to be extremely cautious. When we left Yuhebao, for example, I advocated that we do not follow the highway south, but cross the Wuding and move south parallel to the highway, along the opposite bank. Some of you gentlemen questioned the wisdom of this. Why take such a roundabout way? you asked. As a matter of fact, we had no other choice. The Communists' tactics are most unorthodox! They are the world's toughest and craftiest enemy. Sometimes after they've been completely wiped out — and you've seen it plainly — they suddenly charge and grab you by the neck. It's simply impossible to say what manner of men they are!"

Zhong Song rose abruptly. "It is either we or they. There's no room for the two of us. And so I must ask of you that you rid yourselves of any and all fears of the Communist army. I also request that you never forget this: Attack courageously, be bold but careful, don't give the enemy a single opening, and we will win every encounter!"

"General Zhong Song is a genius of strategy," gushed the short officer, "a positive genius!"

A trifle cold, Zhong Song hugged his arms around his chest. Someone quickly draped a grass-green sweater over his shoulders.

"Tomorrow, we'll cross the Wuding," said Zhong Song. "We'll take Zhenchuanbao with our hands behind our backs. From there we'll immediately drive east through Shajiadian and Wulongbao, join forces with General Liu's troops, and wipe out the Communist army once and for all! A rapid drive like this looks dangerous; actually it's quite safe. The Communists are accustomed to seeing us move slowly. Marching at this speed will take them completely by surprise." Self-satisfied and confident, he repeated, "Completely by surprise!"

"But didn't General Liu send a telegram asking us to remain in Zhenchuanbao for the time being and make a thorough study of the enemy's situation before going east?" asked the short officer tentatively.

"He's become a bird that shies at the sight of a bow! Look here. This is a telegram that's just arrived from Master Hu. He says the Generalissimo wants us to grasp this chance of a lifetime and destroy the Communist armies in the northwest. Master Hu has also sent a telegram to General Liu directing him to go on to Wulongbao and meet us there on the nineteenth."

Another officer said, "I thought General Liu was going to send part of his unit up along the highway to meet us at Zhenchuanbao and that we then would join the rest of his army at Wulongbao."

"I am responsible only to Master Hu," said Zhong Song. "I refuse to take orders from General Liu. His short-sighted, timid methods would make us lose our chance. Not only do I refuse to accept his orders — I'm directing Ziqi to lead our 123rd Brigade in a forced march on Wulongbao. I'm going to prove to Master Hu that our one brigade can reach there sooner than General Liu and his whole Twenty-ninth Army."

The short officer was startled. "But general, you didn't make that point clear at all at our meeting just now! If brother Ziqi first goes east with the 123rd Brigade, won't that be splitting our forces? . . ."

It was a tactless slip. Zhong Song cut him short with a wave of his hand. Pointing at himself, the tip of his finger almost touching his nose, Zhong Song said, "Trust me, gentlemen. Lightning speed is the art of warfare, gentlemen, lightning speed! That is the secret of success." He walked over to the map, picked up a candle, and drew a big circle with his finger over the area between the Wuding and Yellow Rivers.

"Look, gentlemen. The day is fast approaching when a hundred thousand of our men, coming in different columns, will converge on this northern front and wipe out the Communist army. Gentlemen, although our officers and men will have to endure hardships, our division is in a glorious position in China's military world. This is indisputable. . . . Warfare is like chess. If you cannot anticipate the enemy's moves but blunder into battle — as a strategist, you're simply a joke!"

He turned around quickly. "In two or three days, a miracle will be performed in the hills of northern Shaanxi. Right now, the only ones who appreciate the significance of the great event that is about to happen are the Generalissimo and Master Hu."

The short, middle-aged officer bowed from the waist. "Your humble servant has the utmost respect for General Zhong Song's wisdom. When we accomplish our great mission, not only will our military prospects be changed throughout the country, but our deeds will be recorded in military history as a classic of the art of warfare!"

4

DURING the day when enemy reconnaissance planes flew over the area between Mizhi and Jiaxian, all they saw were the ancient yellow hills. At night, however, those hills came to life. Tens of thousands of PLA troops were in rapid motion. On the mountains and in the valleys were infantry, artillery, cavalry. The infantry marched through the valleys with a soft swishing of feet. Tensely, in low voices, they passed the word along: "Keep the ranks closed. Don't run. Take big strides!" Artillery horses panted along the slopes, while the cannoneers pushed the caissons from behind. A troop of cavalry scouts and three or four mounted messengers cantered by along the river flats, the hoofs of horses drumming on the hard ground and striking sparks from the stones. The foot soldiers discussed the riders in low tones.

"Pretty cosy. Never move a step off their horses."

"Huh, I've served in one of those units. It's no cinch."

"That's right. We get where we're going on our own two legs, but when we make camp we can turn right in and go off to dreamland. But them? They've got to feed their horses! It's six of one and half a dozen of the other, whatever outfit you're in."

Had a flare bomb gone off at that moment, you would have seen troops moving in every direction, crossing one another's lines. Men crowded and jostled at forks in the road. There appeared to be a complete absence of order. As a matter of fact, each platoon and squad was proceeding to a destination already fixed in an over-all plan. It was like a game of chess. Although the pieces apparently moved haphazardly, actually they were governed by well defined rules.

At four in the morning, the brigade commanded by Brigadier Chen camped in a secluded mountain valley.

After the sentries left to take their posts on the mountaintops, the remaining men went to sleep on both sides of the road. Some slept bunched together, using their knapsacks for pillows and holding their rifles; others slept seated back to back; many curled tight because of the cold. There were the deep sleepers, whom not even cannon fire could have awakened; there were the snorers, the teeth-gnashers, the ones who talked in their sleep. Some groaned softly because of their aching feet.

Cooks carried water from the river, gathered fuel, rolled sorghum dough for noodles for the invalids. Flames licked the bottoms of the big army cauldrons and danced up around their sides.

Commanders and political officers took cat-naps, leaning against trees; a few sat on the wooden holsters of their pistols, elbows on their knees, their hands supporting their heads, their eyes shut. Several walked among the sleeping men, bending over to feel the head of a man who groaned, or sitting for a long time by the side of a soldier whose breathing sounded uneven. Those who were still awake kept looking up at the night sky. The atmosphere was heavy. They feared that it might rain.

The brigade officers made their quarters in a cave on the side of a mountain. It had not been inhabited for years. Its doors and windows were gone, its corners were a mass of spider-webs. Still, compared with sleeping in the open, the place was a paragon of comfort.

The staff officers were busy hanging military maps on the wall of the cave.

Commissar Yang sat on a blanket, his hands resting on his knees, his head tilted to one side, his eyes fixed on a corner of the room.

Before him, Brigadier Chen paced the floor, occasionally scratching the back of his head with his left hand.

The communications man brought in a radio message.

Commissar Yang glanced through it quickly, walked over to the map and pointed at a village near Zhenchuanbao. "This place has over 5,000 bushels of government grain, old Chen. The general wants us to send a company down to protect the peasants carrying it out. If we move too slowly, the stuff will fall probably into the enemy's hands by noon tomorrow." Yang gave the message to Chen, adding, "The general says after we get the grain out, some of it will go to our brigade."

Chen read the message. He smiled. "We'll do it even if we don't get a morsel of it ourselves."

"Which regiment can we pull a company from?"

"Let Zhao Jin send one of his companies. Our telephone lines are connected now. I'll tell him."

About four in the morning, Dayong and his men were marching through a valley. A soldier they had met told them that their regiment was camped not far beyond. But after walking another three or four miles, they still saw no sign of it.

Dayong observed light coming out of a cave on the mountain slope to the right. Delighted, he ran towards it. The sharp challenge of a sentry brought him up short. The sentry demanded the password of the day.

"We've just come back from a mission," said Dayong, annoyed. "How would we know today's password?"

"Who are you? What outfit?"

"Zhou Dayong, commander of First Company, Heroes Battalion."

"Dayong?" a staff officer cried in the darkness. "Let him through!"

Dayong had reached brigade headquarters, and the light he had seen came from the brigade officers' quarters. He asked the sentry for directions to his regiment and was turning to go when he heard commissar Yang call from the cave, "Is that you out there, Dayong? Come on in."

Three or four days before, regimental commander Zhao Jin had reported to brigadier Chen that they had lost track of Dayong and his company. Chen had demanded that a search be made immediately. "You must bring my fighters back," he had shouted. The brigadier had been depressed and silent since then. He couldn't get Dayong out of his mind. "Dayong is very clever," he kept saying to commissar Yang. "I guarantee nothing's happened to him." But Yang could tell by his voice that Chen was only trying to assure himself.

Now that he heard Dayong talking outside, the brigadier was overjoyed. When Dayong entered, Chen and the commissar looked Dayong over from head to foot, as if seeing him for the first time.

Dayong's head was swathed in bandages, his cheeks were sunken in his thin, dirty face. Sand filled his nostrils and the corners of his eyes. His eyebrows had been singed yellow, making his eyes look enormous. His uniform, spattered with blood and mud, was pitted with powder burns; one sleeve had been burned off to the elbow. His trousers, from the knees down, were in shreds. His feet, bloody and swollen, looked grotesquely large.

But he stood before them like a rock. His lips moved as if he wanted to speak, but they were so dry and swollen it was difficult for him to make any intelligible sound.

The commissar and Chen exchanged a silent glance.

He had changed, changed tremendously. But his eyes retained their old stubborn gleam.

The commissar put his hand on his shoulder. "Dayong," he cried. He shook his head in amazement.

Chen grasped Dayong by the arm. "What are you standing for?" he said roughly. "Aren't you tired enough? Sit down. Rest. Sit down!"

Without looking at Dayong, the brigadier paced the floor. "It's obvious you had a bad time of it, very bad. Where are the men?"

"Outside." How could you speak to your C.O. sitting down? Dayong tried to rise.

Chen pressed down on his shoulders, forcing him to remain seated. The orderly came in with a bowl of drinking water, and the brigadier handed it to Dayong.

Dayong's hands trembled as he took the bowl. They were as swollen as wheat dumplings and covered with dried blood and mud.

The commissar hastened to the men outside.

"You're back! I knew you'd come back," said Chen. "Your regiment sent out all its scouts and over a dozen mounted messengers, looking for you. Did you meet any of them? Have you brought back all your men? Of course, they couldn't all come back. That's understandable, comrade, quite understandable!"

Chen's hand was on his shoulder. Dayong felt very uncomfortable. When he had just joined the army, an ignorant child, the brigadier had admonished him. When he had struggled to keep up on the 8,000-mile Long March, Chen had thus encouraged him. When he had wept from hunger while crossing the snowy mountains and the grasslands, Chen had comforted him. But after he grew old enough to serve as a soldier in the ranks, the brigadier had always been very strict with him, at times so excessively strict that Dayong found it hard to take. Though Dayong often thought of the brigadier, at the same time he tried to avoid him.

As for Chen, Dayong's half-dead appearance stirred his pity and love. He felt like a father to Dayong. With his own eyes he had seen him grow from a beggar child to a hero; with his own hands he had raised him to maturity.

"Tell me, Dayong," he urged, "was the fighting bitter? What was it like on the road?"

"Nothing much happened," Dayong replied awkwardly. His bold eyes looked away in embarrassment. "We finished our covering mission. We led the enemy's main force after us. They hit us a couple of times and we hit them a couple of times."

"It sounds easy, the way you put it! — Look at me. Don't keep looking in the corner. — When you withdrew from the outskirts of Yulin, the enemy must have attacked you. On the road maybe you had a few brushes with the Thirty-sixth, moving south."

Dayong wiped his face with the edge of his tunic. "We did run into them, once or twice," he said, as if embarrassed. "It couldn't be avoided. Anyhow, soldiers are supposed to fight. That's what they're for."

Deeply moved, Chen asked no more. Walking towards the stove, he said, "That Thirty-sixth Division is pushing hard. They're already ten miles north of Mizhi, at Zhenchuanbao." He took a bowl from the stove and brought it to Dayong.

Ho! Three hot taros!

"Come on," said the brigadier. "You can finish these in three gulps, but you'd better eat slowly. If you down them too fast, you won't be able to taste their flavour, and that would be a pity!"

Dayong had stood up as Chen approached him. Because he had risen too quickly, his eyes went black and he saw stars. He shoved an arm against the wall to support himself and closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again, he saw the brigadier regarding him gravely. Looking at the wall, Dayong thought to himself — the brigade commanders have probably been working at the map half the night without a bite to eat. Those three taros must have been prepared for Chen and commissar Yang and the chief of staff.

"Eat," the brigadier prodded him. "You're in luck. We just happened to have these extra taros lying around."

"I'm not hungry," Dayong lied.

"What!" roared Chen. "You're simply outrageous!"

Dayong meekly took the taros without another word. When Chen gave you that penetrating stare, who could fool him?

About to take his first bite, he thought of his men. Yesterday they had complained, "We're hungry, commander. We can't walk another step." Dayong had encouraged them, "Keep going, comrades. I know you. You can march."

But, weary as mud, before he could go to them, his head fell forward on his chest, and he slept, a taro in hand.

Chen stood looking at him, his hands behind his back. Something in Dayong aroused people's respect; he was surprised he hadn't noticed it before.

Commissar Yang came in and walked quietly to Chen's side. They both stood watching Dayong.

Except for Dayong's even breathing, the cave was so quiet you could hear your heart beat.

Shoving his hands in his trouser pockets, the brigadier slowly walked to and fro. Yang remained where he was, breathing softly, as if afraid to disturb Dayong. Let him sleep a minute longer. Only soldiers knew how precious that additional minute's sleep could be.

"He's exhausted," said the commissar in a low voice. "I was just talking with the men. They saw some fierce fighting for several days running. Some of them have been wounded, and they've brought back some prisoners. I've ordered the medics and the political department to look after them right away."

5

CHEN sent for the brigade's chief of commissary and supply. "Some comrades are always spouting about how they're fighting for communism," he said, plunging right into the subject, "but they turn out to be very short of communist spirit when they're brought face-to-face with a concrete problem. What about you?"

"Me? I can't think of any way that I'm lacking in communist spirit."

"Is that so? Well, fine then. Tomorrow, no, today — what have you done about food for headquarters staff today?"

"The peasants have sent us a basket of taros, four pumpkins and a peck of bran. As you know, the brigade's Party committee authorized us to slaughter our animals when we run really short of food. By now, except for our pack horses, we've killed a great many of our horses and mules. The majority of our mounted messengers have become foot messengers! Yesterday we slaughtered an old horse for brigade headquarters; it's been stewing long enough to be edible. Don't worry about a thing, brigadier, I guarantee the comrades will get a meal today. Whether they can eat their fill or not — that's something else again."

"Start serving it immediately. Only don't give to headquarters personnel, give it to the soldiers of First Company, sitting down there on the river bank."

The commissary and supply chief drew a sharp breath and blinked. "Brigadier, whether it's food or anything else, the commissary and supply department always gives first to the combat soldiers and last to the administrative staff. Those are the rules the brigade Party committee has laid down, and they're right, of course. But the headquarters personnel comrades have been having a terrible time too. They didn't even get a smell of food all day yesterday. . . ."

"I know all about that, comrade. I didn't have anything to eat either!"

"But, brigadier . . . it's not that I . . . you don't understand . . . the cooks stewed that meat all night. Their stomachs were rumbling, but they didn't have the heart to taste a single mouthful. . . ."

Chen quelled him with a look. "Serve the meal, at once!"

The commissary and supply chief gazed at Chen hesitantly, then dropped his eyes. "Right."

Chen knew what he was like. So that the men could have a little more to eat, the chief often dumped his rice back into the cauldron when the men weren't looking. Many people in headquarters were suffering from night blindness due to diet deficiency, and he was one of them. The horse that went into the pot today had been his personal mount.

The brigadier walked with him to the door, his hand on the chief's back. "Don't be stingy. That millet being shipped to us from across the river will be here any time now. As for headquarters company, try to think of something else for them tomorrow."

"I've wrung my brain dry, and I've used up all my magic charms!"

"Don't act so helpless. You think you're having a hard time? All you have to worry about is feeding the headquarters staff. What about me? What about the column commander? What about General Peng? People always think their personal difficulties are the world's worst. All right then, try and find some way to feed them. If all else fails, let the headquarters staff comrades tighten their belts. Going hungry is nothing new to us. The comrades won't blame you. Those First Company men have had practically nothing to eat for days. That's really what you call having a hard time. Compared to them you and I and the comrades of headquarters company have been living in luxury!"

A thin gruel of bran, yams, pumpkin and a wide variety of wild herbs bubbled together in the large military cauldron. Beside the cauldron was a steaming hamper of horse meat. The fragrant odour of these delicacies could be smelled a hundred yards away.

While the adjutant ladled out the gruel, the commissary chief, his sleeves rolled up above the elbow, sliced the meat.

"Come and get it," he cried. "Get your lovely sample of the culinary art of headquarters chefs! It's all free! Come and get it!" He wielded his knife. "Absolutely no favouritism. There's meat here and there's bones; come and try your luck! Don't throw your bones away, we need them for tomorrow's soup!"

Dayong was handed a bowl of gruel and a slice of meat, but he couldn't eat a bite. The previous night he had consumed half of the commanders' taros (the rest he had given to a few of his men). Who knew how long the commanders had gone without food? He ripped a piece off his tattered uniform and wrapped the slice of meat in it.

After observing that Chen and the political commissar were standing on a rise overlooking the river, Dayong stole into their cave and placed his gift on the rim of the brick oven. As he was sneaking out, a voice hailed him:

"What are you doing, commander Dayong?"

Dayong's heart beat fast. He turned around. Chen's tall orderly was seated behind the stove, carelessly stroking his chin.

"You nearly scared me to death, old veteran," said Dayong.

The orderly looked at him accusingly. "What are you up to?"

"The men of my company are sending the brigade commanders this bit of meat. If the commanders ask where it came from, you tell them the cooks sent it. I'll punch your head if you give me away."

The brawny orderly planted both feet on the ground and raised his clenched right fist. "I take my oath not to reveal military secrets. In fact if anyone wants to send the commanders another half catty of meat, I'll knock my head on the floor in a dozen grateful kowtows."

The rain was heavier than ever as Dayong left the cave. But back at the river bank the First Company soldiers were standing in neat formation, listening to a talk by the political commissar.

Most of the men were around twenty. Their hair was badly in need of cutting, their chins were covered with black bristles, their uniforms were torn; nine out of ten were barefooted. But every one of them had the militant eyes of a hawk.

The drizzle had changed into a steady downpour. Black clouds hung low over the mountains.

When the political commissar finished speaking, brigadier Chen scanned the faces of the men for a full two or three minutes, then he said:

"Comrades, you are heroes who would dare climb a mountain of blades for the sake of the labouring people."

His voice was low and charged with emotion. "You've come back, but not all the men of your company have come back with you. We have been suffering bitter hardships for years, we have lost many of our comrades. We are travelling a bloody road. All of the sufferings of the Chinese people are crystallized in the lives of the people's soldiers. But no matter how bloody the sacrifice, we still go forward bravely, confident in victory, confident in the justice of our cause."

The commissar stood watching Dayong and his men. True, they were just ordinary people, but they had been steeled in the fires of battle. Their ordinary exteriors concealed much deep thought and emotion. They were men who had been trampled underfoot, but now they were able to rip open the murky sky and let the brilliant rays of the sunshine through. Wasn't one of the greatest achievements of the Chinese revolution that it had developed such men as these?

6

LATE on the night of August 17 after a forced march of over fifteen miles, the brigade made camp. But after only a half-hour's rest the order came: March again at 3:30 a.m.

Chen cleared some essential business out of the way and stretched out on a blanket for a short nap.

Commissar Yang glanced at his watch, then lay down too. "We can still get a half hour of sleep, old Chen," he said drowsily.

The brigadier did not answer. He couldn't keep his eyes open.

Chen had been sleeping only ten minutes when a staff officer came in with combat orders from the column commander. Chen sat up and forced open his eye-lids with an effort.

His sleepiness and fatigue left him as he read the orders with the help of a flashlight. His face brightened and he slapped his knee. "Neat. Very neat. Old Yang, get up. Listen to this."

Commissar Yang nimbly sprang to his feet. "What? Leaving already? Don't we even get a half-hour's sleep?"

The brigadier handed him the orders. "General Peng said the enemy would divide into three columns, and that's exactly what they've done," he chortled. "They carry out his commands almost as well as we do."

Yang rubbed his eyes, then read the orders carefully. "What's so strange about that? This isn't the first time." Although his words were casual, the commissar couldn't keep a note of elation out of his voice. "General Peng has been very clever, avoiding a battle under unfavourable conditions. Now he's pulled them on to a battle ground of our own choosing. We'll hit them good and hard this time and let Hu Zongnan know who we are!"

Chen and the commissar stood before the map on the wall. The brigadier traced the routes of the enemy advance while Yang read out the positions of the various enemy units described in the battle orders. Chen drew a large circle in red around Suide, where the enemy's main force was concentrated, and from there drew three lines extending towards the north-east in the direction of the Yellow River.

"Hu Zongnan has quite an ambitious plan, old Yang."

"Plan, nothing! He's just following the routes we've laid out for him."

The two men laughed. In the stillness of the night their laughter rang with the resonance of a bronze bell.

It was only ten minutes before starting time. The communications men disconnected the telephones and rolled up the lines; Chen's orderly collected his things; the staff officers took down the maps hanging on the walls.

Commissar Yang said, "The enemy are like blind men trying to catch fish with their bare hands, old Chen. They're rushing to a place that's inhabited by neither man nor ghost."

The brigadier thought of the position north of Shajiadian where our main force was concentrated and waiting. "They're walking right into our arms," he said. "Their whole flank will be exposed to us. We only have to stretch out our hand and we'll nab the Thirty-sixth Division lock, stock and barrel."

The troops assembled in the river valley and prepared to march. Political workers took advantage of the interval before setting out to explain to the men what they should pay attention to during the night's march.

Chen and the brigade's commissar walked over to where Zhao Jin's regiment was lined up in formation. Chen said to Zhao Jin:

"When we go into battle, let's see what you fellows are made of. No matter how well General Peng plans, it all goes to waste unless we fight well too."

"Don't worry," Zhao Jin replied. "We're going to make a fine show this time."

"Well said! Is that just your personal opinion?"

"It wouldn't be worth much if it was. All the men feel that way."

"Where's Wei Yi?"

"Gone to talk to the comrades in the non-combat units," said Li Cheng, regimental commissar. "That man is never idle."

"He ought to be made lieutenant commander of the regiment," said Chen approvingly.

"Didn't you say that you and commissar Yang proposed it several times in the column's Party committee? Why hasn't there been any action on it yet?" Li Cheng demanded.

"Let's go. Let's get the troops in motion," commissar Yang urged the brigadier. To Li Cheng he said, "We'll talk about that later."

As dawn broke, Chen and Yang rode side by side at the very head of the line of march. Both of their horses were reddish-brown, and about the same size and conformation. Where the road through the mountain valley was flat, they gave their mounts free rein and the two horses, neither of them very large, arched their tails and sped along at a quick, even pace. Leaning slightly back in their saddles, the breeze flapping the padded jackets draped over their shoulders, the commanders made a gallant picture. After running for a while, they slowed their horses to a short trot. The animals trotted neck and neck.

Around breakfast time, the troops halted and made camp. It was the same as before every other battle. Orders, a march, clean your weapons, hold meetings, discussions, the cooks prepare food — all in an atmosphere of tension.

Chen, the brigade's commissar and chief of staff separated and passed on the battle orders individually to each of the regimental and battalion commanders. Later, the brigadier and commissar Yang sat beneath a crab apple tree, examining a map they had spread upon the ground. Beside them stood a brigade section chief and a number of staff officers. Chen measured distances on the map with his hand and lightly marked in pencil our own and the enemy's positions.

The distance from Zhenchuanbao to Wulongbao was twenty-three miles from east to west as the crow flies. The Thirty-sixth Division was stretched out in a long line, marching from Zhenchuanbao due east, intending to link up with the enemy's main force on the banks of the Yellow River. Its vanguard, the 123rd Brigade, had already reached Wulongbao. The 165th Brigade and other units, led by the headquarters staff of the Thirty-sixth Division, were near Shajiadian, about ten or twelve miles from Wulongbao.

Our positions were as follows: An army of the PLA and two local militia regiments at Dangchuansi, between Shajiadian and Wulongbao, to cut the contact between the enemy's 123rd Brigade and the main body of the Thirty-sixth Division. Our main force was waiting east of Shajiadian. The moment the 165th Brigade and other units of the Thirty-sixth Division moved a step to the east from Shajiadian, they would fall into "General Peng's sack."

Reading off the designations of the enemy units, Chen lightly marked them on the map. He felt very confident about the outcome of this battle. Commissar Yang stood behind him, leaning forward, his hands resting on his knees, looking at the map over Chen's shoulder.

"The Thirty-sixth is Hu Zongnan's ace division. It hasn't run into any trouble so far in the North-west campaign. We'll see how cocky they are this time after we get through with them," said Yang.

Chen stood up and indicated to the staff officers to roll up the map. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and fanned himself with his cap. "We'll give them a taste of trouble, all right." He glanced up at the sky. "What a muggy day. But please don't rain, old heavens!"

An orderly brought a few bowls of drinking water and a couple of millet and bran muffins.

While Chen was eating, the communications section chief brought him a message. Everyone crowded around to read it. It said in substance that our armies under Generals Liu and Deng, on August 11, in a rapid advance had swept

towards the Dabie Mountains and were threatening both banks of the Changjiang River. Our armies under General Chen were preparing to ford the Yellow River between Loyang and Shanxian the day after tomorrow (August 20) and drive into western Henan. . . . The People's Liberation Army was launching major offensives from the Yellow River on the north to the Changjiang in the south, from northern Jiangsu in the east to the wide plains of the Han River in the west. . . .

Commissar Yang bounded to his feet. "Let's take five minutes to call a meeting of regimental officers and announce this news!"

"Right!"

A mounted messenger galloped off to summon the officers to the meeting.

In the flash of an eye they all came running to brigade headquarters.

Yang's intelligent eyes shone as he looked the officers over. His gaze fell on the tall chief of staff, Wei Yi. Wei Yi hunched up his shoulders.

The officers' faces were tense with eager excitement.

"Comrades," said the commissar, "the day we've been waiting for has arrived! At the beginning of this month, the army under Generals Liu and Deng took the offensive. Now, we are going to launch major offensives on every front!"

Staring at him, the officers crowded forward, their hearts beating rapidly beneath their ragged uniforms. This was what they had been hoping for — hoping for a long, long time! They had created the conditions for launching these major offensives with their own sweat and blood, drop by drop.

After briefly and succinctly reviewing the situation on the nation's battlefronts, Yang said, "In only a little over a year of fighting, we've pulled the props from under the running dogs of American imperialism — the Chiang Kai-shek traitors. Comrades, the army led by General Chen is about to cross the Yellow River in a drive into western Henan. Hu Zongnan's old lair, Xian, is going to find itself on the front lines. In another two or three days Hu Zongnan is going to learn the meaning of the word 'trouble.' You now can see, comrades, why the Central Committee and Chairman Mao ordered General Peng to lure Hu Zongnan's main force here, beside the Great Wall, away from Yanan. And now that we've brought the enemy up here, we're going to smash them. If we win here in northern Shaanxi, not only will we turn the tide of battle in the north-west, but we'll also be giving strong support to our forces on other fronts — especially to our army that's going to push across the Yellow River the day after tomorrow. Tell our men: The time has come for us to go all out!"

Mounted messengers flew through the valleys and along the mountain slopes, bringing news and orders. They galloped so rapidly up the slopes their horses' hoofs never seemed to touch the ground. Seen from afar, horse and rider stretched into a single line, like an arrow shot from a bow.

All the officers and men were just as thrilled as the messengers.

Commanders and political officers of every rank were addressing the soldiers, waving their fists, waving their caps.

From all sides came cheers for the general offensive, cheers for Chairman Mao!

Foot soldiers, artillery men, cavalry, stretcher bearers . . . surged through the little valley north-east of Shajiadian like a mountain torrent.

Wei Yi, regimental chief of staff, stood on the river bank

at a fork in the valley and watched his men trotting past. They carried on their shoulders dismantled parts of trench mortars, heavy machine-guns. . . .

"Pass the word along," Wei Yi shouted, raising his arm. "Remove the gun covers! Remove the muzzle caps!"

Suddenly, a great cloud of yellow dust came howling over the mountains. The soldiers were blinded by the wind and sand. Their clothes billowing, the men leaned into the wind and pressed forward.

The big wind piled up huge black clouds, and the world turned dark. It was as if an immense black curtain had been stretched across the sky.

A real rainstorm is brewing! thought Wei Yi, as he hurried towards the head of the line of march.

But no matter how the wind howled, no matter how black the sky, the infantry, the artillery kept moving in a steady stream from north to south, hastening towards Mount Changgao, east of Shajiadian. . . .

Lightning ripped across the dark sky; a great clap of thunder seemed to split the earth. Rain came pouring down and, in an instant, everything was obliterated in a watery, misty veil. Torrents rushed down the mountains with a roar like the Yellow River bursting a dyke.

The decisive battle in the North-west campaign began in the wild storm of wind and rain. . . .

Before dark our forces had already shattered a portion of the enemy army. . . .

The storm still raged as night fell. Our men were unable to move, stalled on the mountain-tops by the pouring rain.

Lightning! Lightning! Streaks of lightning splitting the limitless darkness. Claps of thunder, savage wind, torrents roaring through the gullies. . . . Rain fell heavily, as if the lightning had torn open the sky and released a deluge.

On the mountains, the men seemed to be standing under a waterfall. Horses and mules skidded and slipped into the deep chasms while their hostlers shouted and wept. Rabbits and field mice, flushed out of their burrows, ran wildly in all directions.

Wei Yi, regimental chief of staff, emerging from Second Battalion's command post, followed north along a mountain ridge. He was covered with mud and his drenched uniform clung to his body. He walked bare-footed, his cotton shoes having long since been sucked off by the soupy mire. His left trouser leg had been ripped by brambles from the knee down. Bending over, he tore off the flapping cloth tatter and wiped the rain streaming down his face with it. Before he had gone fifty yards, he met Zhao Jin.

"Just look at this damned storm," he fumed to the regimental commander. "Where's the commissar?"

"Over at the Third Battalion." Zhao Jin stood with his back to the wind. He too cursed the weather.

"Filthy rain," said Wei Yi fretfully. Then, as if comforting himself, he added, "Anyhow it's worse for the enemy than it is for us. We're already in position, but they're still on the march. This sudden storm and our attack coming at the same time have got them dragging their tails."

Just then a section chief of the political department went by escorting over a hundred prisoners from Third Battalion to regimental headquarters. Wei Yi questioned the escort briefly, then reported to Zhao Jin, "These prisoners are from nine different companies in five different battalions, commander. It looks like the enemy are so confused they can't find their own heads!"

Zhao Jin wiped the rain from his face. "We've smashed their flank, but the battle we've been waiting for day and night winds up in a rainstorm. . . . Son of a bitch! Of all the rotten luck!"

The storm has certainly raised hell with everything. What do we do next? That was the question uppermost in Zhao Jin's and Wei Yi's minds. Ahead of our army was the Yellow River, behind us was the Wuding, on all sides of us was a superior enemy force. We simply had to win this battle! Our army concentrated in south-western Shanxi, poised to cross the Yellow River the day after tomorrow, was awaiting our victory at Shajiadian. The North-west campaign was an integral part of the nation-wide counter-offensive. All of the people's hopes were pinned on its victorious outcome.

7

IF you skipped across four or five mountain-tops, going east from the village of Shajiadian, you would come upon a row of caves half-way up a slope. Originally, they had been homes; later the peasants used them for storing brushwood and fodder. Today, they had become the haven of refuge for Kuomintang general Zhong Song.

Walking down from the command post on the top of the mountain, Zhong Song was a sorry sight. His trousers and the sleeves of his uniform jacket were muddy, for this commander of the reorganized Thirty-sixth Division had taken quite a few tumbles. Ever since yesterday his heart had been consumed with fire, and the wrinkles on his face seemed to have increased. Running from the corners of his eyes into his cheeks, they looked as if someone had drawn them with thick, heavy strokes of a pen. Anger smouldered in his bloodshot eyes.

When Zhong Song entered the door of his quarters in the cave, he found his brigade commanders, chiefs of staff, and the commander of one of the regiments waiting for him. He stood with his legs apart, his fists raised and clenched. He looked at no one, and his brows twitched fitfully.

Everyone's eyes were upon him, and those eyes too were bloodshot, tense, worried. The only exception was the regimental colonel. His face was dark and purplish, but he was completely at his ease, apparently the only one of them with any courage.

A burst of machine-gun fire shook the air. Several of the officers trembled as if struck by a bolt of electricity. They strained their ears to listen. After the rain, the sound of firing carried very clearly, and was exceptionally irritating to the nerves. Only the colonel showed no reaction. He was looking Zhong Song over. Beneath his khaki officer's tunic one could see that Zhong Song wore the yellow cotton cloth of an ordinary soldier, and under that a cotton-padded jacket of coarse, black homespun which the local peasants wore.

Why the jacket? mused the colonel. Is it a disguise to run away in when our army is defeated? I wouldn't put it past him. . . . The colonel breathed hard, his nostrils moving angrily.

Zhong Song closed his eyes and rested his hand on his brow, as if in pain. Then he knelt down and swept his eyes over the map spread upon the ground. "The Red Army," he grated, "evil, crafty devils!"

"The weather has been very bad," said a brigadier heavily. "If it hadn't been for the rain, we would be in Wulongbao already."

"In all my years as a commander I've never seen a more disgusting place than this north Shaanxi," Zhong Song raged. "Nothing but mountains, wind and rain. And the peasants are all tricky rascals!"

An officer standing behind the brigadier said, "It looks now as if we were wrong to send our 123rd Brigade so far ahead of our division and let it go to Wulongbao first."

"I didn't invite you gentlemen here to engage in senseless recriminations! . . . Generalissimo Chiang and Master Hu Zongnan are resting great hopes on us. . . . We must remain calm and steady!"

Coming over to the map, the chief of staff said, "As a matter of fact, the enemy has already surrounded Shajiadian —"

"It's too early to talk about being surrounded," Zhong Song interrupted. "All we can say now is that there is some danger of being surrounded. I have ordered Brigadier Liu Ziqi to turn around and come back from Wulongbao with his 123rd Brigade and to rejoin us at Shajiadian, no matter what the cost."

"That may not be possible," said one of the officers. "Signs of the enemy have already been seen between Wulongbao and Shajiadian."

Zhong Song took a menacing step towards him. "Are you out of your mind?" he shouted. "Don't you suppose I know what the enemy is doing? The enemy between Wulongbao and Shajiadian is just a small probing unit. The Red Army always operates in large concentrated forces; they never split their strength. You gentlemen must remain calm. Don't exaggerate the situation, please!"

"If General Liu Kan only realized that we're all in the same boat and also rushed up here with his five and a half brigades, nothing would be lost," said the brigadier. "But he's sent a radio message saying that he's unable to march because of the heavy rain."

"Can't march because of the rain!" Zhong Song snorted. "I won't forget that! He's just trying to preserve his own forces. . . . Never mind. Master Hu has ordered him to arrive at Shajiadian by tomorrow afternoon or face a court martial. What's more, Master Hu is going to fly over Shajiadian tomorrow and direct the operation of our units personally from the plane. . . ." Zhong Song looked from left to right, then went on: "For the sake of caution, gentlemen, we must hold out in Shajiadian for one day, and not march east for the time being. Of course we can stand firm for one day — there's no question about it. Our men know how to fight and they have a spirit of self-sacrifice. Master Hu has promised to send the entire air force to give us support."

"In other words — hold the fort and wait for reinforcements?" queried the brigadier.

"Hold the fort and wait for reinforcements — but actively, aggressively. . . . We must seize all heights overlooking Shajiadian. Then, if the enemy attacks, they'll have to fight for them one by one. That will give us precious time. Time . . . that's what we need — time. We must hold every mountain-top to the death, fight to the last man. Any officer who relinquishes a position — no matter what his rank — will be shot. It's not that I'm merciless, but the situation is extremely dangerous. Pass on my order, gentlemen, right down to the lowest ranks!"

The emergency meeting of the Communist Party committee of the brigade lasted only twenty minutes. The officers waited impatiently for the return of Brigadier Chen, who was attending another meeting at Field Army Headquarters.

They talked about yesterday's big rain and the battle that did not come off. A few sat on the floor, glumly resting their chins on their fists.

All eyes were on Chen the moment he entered the door.

Yesterday's battle fizzled out, they seemed to say, but what about tomorrow? The officers deluged him with questions:

"Are we going to fight, brigadier?"

"Where is the enemy? Have they got away?"

"Did you see General Peng?" asked the political commissar. "What did he say? Did that one blow we got in yesterday have any effect?"

Chen laughed. He took out a cigarette and tapped it against his cigarette case. "I saw another comrade at headquarters — Zheng Shide. He used to work in the 120th Division; many of you know him. He's just come from northwest Shanxi. He says General He Long has been very busy there, on the banks of the Yellow River. General He asked after a number of comrades in our brigade, especially Wei Yi. He has a very good impression of Wei Yi."

"We ought to write to him more often," Wei Yi smiled, hunching up his shoulders.

"General He forgives us. He knows we're busy — and lazy!"

The officers wished the brigadier would stop his joking and tell them how tomorrow's battle was going to be fought. Most of them could tell from his manner, however, that things were not going too badly.

Chen said, "When I got to headquarters, General Peng was sitting beneath a tree chatting with the local peasants. They talked about their crops, the mountains of north Shaanxi, autumn rains. . . . The general was smiling and listening. Finally, he went with me into his cave. 'Comrade Chen,' he said, 'we should be like a broom that the people can use, not like idols they worship in a temple, idols they compliment and fear. Idols look impressive, but it's still the humble broom that sweeps them clean.' "

Moved and interested, the officers exchanged glances.

Chen walked over to the wall map. "There was no meeting at headquarters. General Peng talked to each of us separately. He hasn't changed his mind about smashing the Thirty-sixth Division in a concentrated attack, nor has there been any change in the main plan or general deployment of forces."

"But, old Chen," commissar Yang reminded him, "when the rain washed out our battle on the heights yesterday, our strength, our positions and General Peng's aims were all revealed to the enemy."

The officers looked at one another and nodded. The commissar had expressed the thought which was troubling them the most.

"North Shaanxi weather changes quickly," Chen replied, "but the military situation changes even quicker. Yesterday's battle radically changed the situation. As soon as the Thirty-sixth Division found itself facing a superior force, it sent an urgent request for instructions to Hu Zongnan. Comfortably seated hundreds of miles away, Hu replied with an order: Pull your scattered forces together again, no matter what the cost, build fortifications on the mountains around Shajiadian, and wait for reinforcements."

Chen pointed to a place on the map about thirteen miles to the east of Shajiadian. "This is Wulongbao. When the vanguard of the Thirty-sixth — the 123rd Brigade — reached here and found that Liu Kan's five and a half brigades had not yet arrived, they became panic-stricken. Liu Kan's forces were still milling around ten or fifteen miles to the east, on the banks of the Yellow River. Having run ahead of Zhong Song and the main body of the Thirty-sixth Division, and not having made contact with the forces of Liu Kan, the 123rd Brigade is dangerously isolated. When they learned that Zhong Song is encircled at Shajiadian, they lost their heads, and are now rushing back to rejoin him. We hear that even though mountain torrents have swept away whole platoons and whole companies, the 123rd Brigade is persisting in their wild scramble to rejoin their main force. They're as frantic as cornered rats!"

Zhao Jin was standing behind the brigade commissar. "The Thirty-sixth Division is in the palm of our hand, commissar," he said.

"That's obvious," stated Li Cheng. He looked at Wei Yi. Wei Yi indicated his agreement.

"Last night, General Peng received an intelligence report that Liu Kan's five and a half brigades are tailing the 123rd Brigade in their race towards Shajiadian," the brigadier continued. "Based on this report, General Peng made a slight readjustment in deployment of strength."

Chen pointed on the map to Mount Changgao, two and a half miles to the east of Shajiadian. "General Peng has ordered two brigades to lie in ambush on this mountain and stop the returning 123rd Brigade." He indicated the stretch between Mount Changgao and Wulongbao. "Originally the one PLA column and two local militia regiments stationed here were to hold off the 123rd Brigade until our main force had wiped out the enemy at Shajiadian. Now their mission is to let the 123rd Brigade go by, but as soon as it falls into our ambush at Mount Changgao, to slash down from the north and hold up the five and a half brigades that are following. This will enable our main force to destroy both the enemy at Shajiadian and the 123rd Brigade as well. That, comrades, is how our tactics have been revised to meet the changed situation."

The officers all began enthusiastically talking at once. They could hardly wait to convey their excitement and joy to their men.

8

A LIVELY breeze the next morning blew the dark rain clouds away. Patches of blue appeared in the sky and shafts of sunlight pierced the overcast. White mist rose from the mountains and valleys.

Lines of PLA troops moved along the slopes and through the ravines. The main force of the North-west Field Army was converging on the Shajiadian area from all directions.

That morning, from the forward command post of the North-west Field Army on a mountain-top about two miles due north of Shajiadian, came the order of General Peng Dehuai:

> *Dear Comrades:*
>
> *The destruction of the Thirty-sixth Division will mark the turning point of our operations in the North-west from defensive to offensive. It also is the commencement of our drive to retake Yanan and liberate the entire North-west. Let all officers and men fight boldly. The mission is to completely wipe out the enemy before dusk today.*
>
> *Peng Dehuai*
> *August 20*

A fierce struggle began on the mountains surrounding Shajiadian.

Suddenly, the task of Chen's brigade was changed. They were ordered to proceed through a ravine at full speed to the gorge at Zhangjiaping, about four miles north-east of Shajiadian, and prepare to rejoin the battle from there.

The brigade pushed forward along the narrow ravine road.

Brigadier Chen, commissar Yang and other brigade personnel stood beside a small temple on the banks of a stream.

"Speed it up," Chen shouted. "That firing is very near. Can't you hear it?"

Brigade commissar Yang called to Zhao Jin, "Send some men up the mountain to reconnoitre, quick! There's firing from several places now, and they all sound very close."

Almost before Yang's words were out of his mouth, the huge frame of Wei Yi appeared on a low bluff. Sleeves rolled up to the elbows, hands on his hips, the regimental chief of staff snapped an order to the men of the scouts platoon:

"Come with me, on the double!" With long steady strides, he moved off from the crowded ranks of the marching column.

The narrow road in the ravine was jammed with men, field pieces, animals. . . . Commanders were shouting at units they thought were blocking the paths of their own men. There was a bedlam of orders, shouts, whinnying animals.

With twenty scouts, Wei Yi climbed the mountain south of the village of Zhangjiaping. He strode on steadily, effortlessly, but the scouts, leaning forward at the waist, had to run to keep up with him.

The mountain summit was clouded in mist. Dark clouds scudded across the sky. The entire PLA column was in motion at the foot of the mountain. Suddenly, from the top of the very mountain which Wei Yi was climbing, came an intense burst of gunfire.

In one breath, Wei Yi and his men dashed to the top. Ho! The place was swarming with enemy soldiers. Madly firing and yelling, they charged down the ridge towards the PLA scouting party.

Wei Yi snatched a tommy-gun from the hands of his orderly and sprayed the oncoming enemy. At the motion of his hand, the scouts all dropped to the ground and began firing.

Kneeling on one knee, Wei Yi shouted at the top of his voice, "Hold them, comrades!" And he ordered the messenger, "Get our troops up here, fast!"

The youngster went bounding down the mountain. Halfway down the slope, hopping with anxiety, he yelled to the PLA men below:

"Come on up here! Hurry! On the run!"

The PLA soldiers went tearing up the mountain. . . .

Wei Yi and his scouts were battling the enemy with hand grenades.

The chief of staff knew very well that if the enemy could hold this height, they would be able to pin down the entire brigade so that it couldn't move from the ravine. What a fearful prospect! And it would influence the whole operation.

His eyes swept the enemy. Then he rushed ahead of the scouts, flung himself down and fired another twenty rounds from his Mauser. "We won't give an inch!" he shouted. Burning eyes fixed on the enemy, he continued firing and giving orders.

Swish — swish — swish — heavy pressure shoved down from above, combined with a screaming whistle and a rush of hot air. The sky seemed to split open as artillery shells exploded in a deafening boom, and a curtain of smoke rose.

Wei Yi came charging through the smoke. His mind stubbornly clung to one thought: Make every second count! He could see the faces of the enemy soldiers clearly, he could hear their officers shouting commands. But they all looked small and insignificant to him.

Beside him a scout was firing his rifle from the waist, as if in a bayonet drill. Although the man took no aim, each time he fired an enemy soldier fell. After the battle, I must give him a commendation, Wei Yi thought. He was firing in a kneeling position. Suddenly, the scout collapsed on top of him. Busy firing, Wei Yi straightened up to shake off the weight and ran forward a few paces, wondering vaguely where the scout who shot so well from the waist had disappeared to.

Bullets whined overhead. Shells burst on all sides. Smoke swallowed up Wei Yi, then spewed him out again. Beside him, scouts continued to fall. He had no idea how many were left under his command. All he knew was that they were holding back a swarm of KMT soldiers. An enemy carrying a pair of binoculars went down; another grasping a rifle with fixed bayonet came within ten paces of him before the chief of staff's pistol stopped him. An incendiary shell exploded right before Wei Yi's eyes, and his uniform began to flame. He rolled on the ground to extinguish the blaze, then pulled off the scorched tunic and went on fighting, stripped to the waist. A blow in the chest struck him to the ground. Can I be hit? he wondered. He could see black clouds racing across the sky. Nonsense! I can't be wounded; it's impossible! He heard a PLA man, leaping past him, shout:

"The commander's been wounded. Take your orders from me, comrades! Communists, not one step backwards!"

"Charge! Charge! Not one step backwards!" cried the fighters.

Good! My soldiers! A wave of strength radiated through Wei Yi's body. He pushed himself up with his hands. The earth, the sky, the mountains — all were green, all were moving. The men need to hear my voice, he thought.

"Comrades," he shouted with all his might, "never retreat!"

Wei Yi felt his orderly embrace him from behind, trying to cover him with his own body. "Go!" Wei Yi cried harshly. "Get into the fight. Hold back the enemy!"

Resting on one knee, he flung grenades and gave his commands. But with every shout, every move, blood gushed from his chest wound. His head was spinning and black shadows whirled before his eyes. His body felt strangely light. He supported himself with one hand on the ground. With the other hand, although it was weak and trembling, he continued to fire. He tried to shout, but he couldn't hear the sound of his own voice. Dizzy and light-headed, he saw everything fading away. But even then he didn't fall. He remained kneeling on one knee, both hands propped against the ground, his head resting on his chest, motionless. In the heat of battle, the scouts had the impression that the chief of staff was looking at something on his chest.

Over a dozen enemy units, totalling about two thousand men, encircled Wei Yi and his scouts. Just at this critical juncture, Zhao Jin and Li Cheng came charging up with the PLA troops.

Zhao Jin rushed right by Wei Yi without a backward glance. The face of the regimental C.O. was dark; his eyes flashed fire.

"Give 'em your bayonets!" he roared.

The PLA men swept forward like a tide. Gritting their teeth in rage, they stabbed their bayonets through the backs of the fleeing enemy; they hung their light machine-guns around their necks and swung the sputtering barrels in a slow arc, mowing the enemy down like grass. . . .

Li Cheng knelt beside Wei Yi and hugged him tightly to his breast. Blood still flowed from Wei Yi's chest, and although he had stopped breathing and his heart no longer beat, Li Cheng couldn't believe he was dead. Rocking him in his arms, cheek pressed close to cheek, Li Cheng cried entreatingly:

"Wei Yi! Wei Yi! Wei Yi! . . ."

But Wei Yi would never again answer his friend's call.

There was a terrible pressure in Li Cheng's chest. He stared at Wei Yi's face. Shells burst all around him, rifle bullets pinged by, dangerously close, but he heard and saw nothing.

Finally he turned and ordered Wei Yi's orderly to carry Wei Yi's body down the mountain. The young man didn't say a word, but picked up the dead chief of staff's pistol and began running towards the front.

"Come back here!" Li Cheng shouted.

"Let me go, commissar! Let me go! Let me get a few for him. . . ." The young orderly's left hand was agonizedly tearing his tunic.

"Come back," Li Cheng insisted. "I want you to carry him down."

Zhao Jin and his regiment attacked the enemy fiercely and took three mountain-tops in succession. . . .

The big guns of the PLA roared with increasing intensity, pouring steel down on the enemy's heads. They completely blotted out the sound of the machine-guns and made the mountains tremble beneath the impact of their missiles. Enemy shells screamed through the air and, bursting, threw up huge curtains of smoke and dust that cast a pall over the sun.

Brigadier Chen and brigade commissar Yang set up the brigade's command post on the height where Wei Yi had died. The mountain gun battery was established on a mountain to the left.

It went into action immediately, the guns bouncing back in recoil as they spewed out thunder and flame. The heavy shells flew far, ripping through the air over the enemy with terrifying howls. Just before each charge of the PLA troops, the artillery rained its fire on the enemy's front lines. When the PLA got a foothold, the big guns extended their range deeper into the enemy position. When the enemy broke and fled, they were flayed with bursting shrapnel shells.

The enemy were really frantic that day. A dozen American-made planes wheeled above the heads of the PLA fighters, bombing and strafing. They dropped some two hundred bombs on the artillery positions. Stripped to the waist, even when enemy bullets nipped the rims of their wide straw hats, the artillery men stuck to their guns.

"Comrades," the artillery battalion's political instructor exhorted, "what we want is speed, accuracy and power!"

"We're flinging them hard and fast," replied the cannoneers. "We're using shells from Truman to plaster Truman's running dogs!"

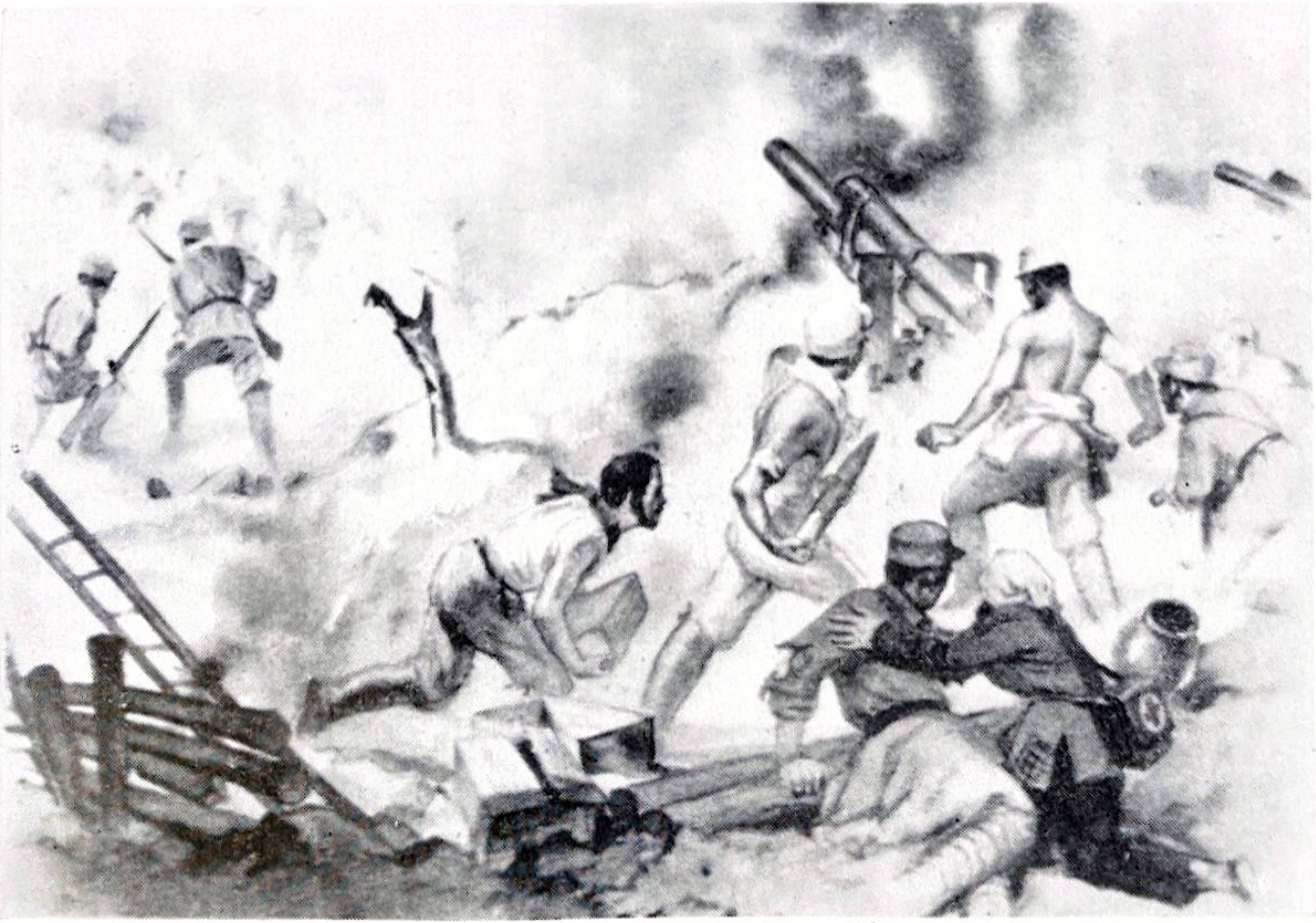
The earth shook with explosions as the steel screamed across the sky. Smoke rose for miles around the perimeter of Shajiadian.

Wherever you looked, red flags could be seen through the smoke and flames. From all sides bugles sounded the call to charge. Every officer and man of the North-west Field Army drove relentlessly against the enemy. . . .

All this time General Peng Dehuai stood on a mountain-top about two miles north of Shajiadian. This was his headquarters. Beside him stood high-ranking officers. All around them were dug-outs, fox-holes and communication trenches filled with men of the Field Army Headquarters. Soldiers of the guards battalion occupied the heights to the left and right.

Field telephones rang, men hurried back and forth. General Peng, calm and solemn, stood observing, thinking.

A commander hung up a phone, climbed out of a trench, stood beside General Peng and peered at Shajiadian through a pair of field glasses. "I just spoke to all columns," he said. "In general the attack is going well."



General Peng pointed to the east of Shajiadian. "There?" he asked, and listened to the sound of firing in that vicinity.

"It's going well in the east too."

General Peng from time to time examined the map spread upon the ground, spoke to the column commanders at the front over the field telephone, listened to their reports, quietly issued orders. At times he examined through his field glasses the major enemy positions around Shajiadian under attack or, putting his hands behind his back, listened to the firing two or three miles east of that village. Once he said, with a smile, "Hu Zongnan's eyes are bigger than his stomach. He wants everything and can't bear to part with anything. The result is he's going to end up with nothing." The officers standing beside General Peng laughed.

Three enemy planes which had been strafing the peak ahead banked and began skimming in from the east.

"Those planes are coming this way, General Peng," said one of the officers. "You're too exposed here."

General Peng glanced up at the American-made planes. "They're in no condition to bother about us." He walked back and forth a few paces, then pointed at a plane whose nose was painted red. "Hu Zongnan must have cursed that pilot dizzy." He smiled calmly.

Shortly after noon, a communications man poked his head out of a trench and said, "Number Three, telephone."

General Peng picked up the receiver and said in a slow even voice, "Number Three speaking."

"This is the Courageous Detachment, Number Three," said the voice on the other end of the wire. "We've completely wiped out the enemy's 123rd Brigade and captured its commander, Liu Ziqi. . . ."

What had happened was that when the unit waiting on the height between Shajiadian and Wulongbao saw the 123rd

Brigade pass by, it swept down from the north and cut the brigade off from the five and a half brigades under Liu Kan which were following. Then the PLA detachment divided into two forces, one attacking Liu Kan and his men, the other driving the 123rd Brigade to where our troops were lying in ambush two or three miles east of Shajiadian. By the time the 123rd Brigade came within sight of Zhong Song's army which it had come to reinforce, it was itself already virtually destroyed.

As General Peng put down the telephone receiver, his face shone with an almost imperceptible excitement.

"Notify all units of the news," he said quietly to one of the comrades.

About an hour later, the atmosphere suddenly grew very tense. It was not that the firing had become any heavier. No, the noise of battle still continued to roar like a tornado. The tension was manifested in the movements and expressions of all the officers and men.

General Peng was looking through his field glasses when a staff officer came up and reported, "The enemy's radio-transmitter has been sending continuous messages to Hu Zongnan announcing that they are in extreme danger."

Shortly thereafter, another staff officer hurried up. "Number Three, Hu Zongnan is swearing at Zhong Song by name, not even using his code designation, forbidding him to break out of our encirclement."

General Peng nodded. "They're in no position to bother about military security measures any more."

By two that afternoon, our attacking forces had taken several important heights.

Brigade headquarters kept moving ahead. "We're going

forward again, old Yang," Chen remarked to the brigade commissar.

"Good," replied Yang. "The further the better."

This was an old custom with these two. Whenever the brigade was in battle, they kept shifting the command post as far forward as possible.

The brigade chief of staff, his cap pushed to the back of his head and perspiring freely, was dashing back and forth, directing the fire of the mountain guns and other field pieces. Pointing at the ridge Zhao Jin's regiment was attacking, Yang slapped Chen on the back.

"Just look at that company," he cried happily. "It's being led beautifully. See how cleverly those men move. Excellent, excellent! Those men should get a commendation."

The brigadier's face was iron-dark; his field glasses hung at his chest. Once the attack began he and the commissar had to shout to be heard, even though they were talking face to face.

The unit the commissar had indicated was First Company. Dayong and Chengde, the company's political instructor, were leading their men in a fierce attack upon the enemy. Encountering heavy fire, several of the men slipped around to the side of the enemy position and rained hand grenades into their trenches; then, taking advantage of the smoke, they charged into the heart of the position. Enemy soldiers came leaping out of their trenches and met the oncoming PLA soldiers in hand-to-hand combat. Ten minutes later, First Company was in full control of the height, with enemy survivors fleeing down the slope.

"Why don't they keep going?" Chen shouted excitedly. "The enemy's collapsed. It's enough to drive a man out of his mind! Why don't they keep penetrating in depth?"

Before the words were out of his mouth, a red flag suddenly appeared on the other side of the ridge. As First Company was finishing off the enemy on the first height, Zhang Pei, political instructor of First Battalion, led a company around the enemy's right flank. Not only did they stop the KMT soldiers running from Dayong's company, but before the enemy on a second height knew what was coming, rushed up and took that position to.

When Chen saw his troops knifing deep into the enemy lines, he grabbed up the phone, his hands shaking with excitement, his face streaming perspiration. Mopping his face he shouted, "Mountain Gun Battalion?" Just then, the line was cut by an exploding shell. He called for his communications section chief.

"Go on up there! Tell our mountain gun battery to lay down a barrage in depth. Quick! Quick!"

Soon six mountain guns were thundering in unison. Every shell smashed deep and hard.

"Good!" cried Chen. "Good! Keep it up! Pour it into them!"

Enemy artillery returned fire in an effort to silence our field pieces. Many shells landed close to brigade headquarters.

"The enemy is calling on us, old Chen," said the political commissar. "We'd better move."

"Right, let's move," the brigadier replied, but he continued to look through his field glasses.

Enemy shells were bursting all around them. Overhead, seven enemy planes bombed and strafed. When the planes tipped into a screaming dive, Yang seized the brigadier and pulled him to the ground, saying, "Get down. The enemy will —"

A stream of hot lead ripped through the place Chen had been standing a moment before, kicking up a line of little geysers of earth.

Chen laughed. "You saved my life again, old Yang!"

"If you put it that way, you've saved a dozen lives for me!"

A shell burst dircctly in front of them.

Spitting earth out of his mouth, the commissar called, "Old Chen!"

The brigadier was rubbing his eyes and swearing.

Bending forward at the waist, they led the men of their command post at a run over towards the left, and set up the post in a new position.

At five o'clock, the sun hung only a short length from the rim of the western mountains.

Brigadier Chen watched the advancing PLA units through his field glasses. Most of the regiments moved quite rapidly. But Zhao Jin's regiment seemed to be stalled by the enemy on Height No. 7. What was wrong? They had been attacking that height for more than an hour. They had pushed up, and been driven back, pushed up, driven back again. . . . The intensity of each assault was reflected in Chen's tight, excited face.

The brigade commissar hurried in. "Old Chen," he said softly, his mouth close to the brigadier's ear, "there's something wrong with Zhao Jin's outfit. I called them on the field phone just now, and the only commander in their command post is a staff officer."

Chen looked at his watch. "General Peng wants us to finish off the enemy by dusk. What in the world is Zhao Jin up to?" Chen tried to reach the regimental C.O. on the phone, but the line was dead. He sent a staff officer and a communications man out to check the line. He examined Zhao Jin's position with his glasses. "The enemy's putting up such a desperate resistance . . ." he mused. Crossing the dug-out, he took the commissar by the arm.

"Have you noticed, old Yang? There's something special about that place Zhao Jin's attacking."

Yang had been observing Zhao Jin's regiment all along. "That's right," he agreed. "Our men have made at least a dozen assaults. You know what I think, old Chen? Zhao Jin has probably hit upon the enemy's most vital spot."

This coincided exactly with his own opinion. Chen happily took up the phone. "Zhao Jin? This is 701. I know you've made many assaults. The enemy are stubborn? Sure they are. It's up to us to beat them and prove we're more stubborn than they are. Good units like nothing better than working on stubborn enemies. Yes. What? Oh. Yes. You think the enemy is. . . ."

"Nothing of the sort," the voice on the other end responded. "701, I think we've caught them by the neck."

"Is that what you really think?" Chen shouted. "Zhao Jin, find some way to check up on that in a hurry. Capture a couple of prisoners and question them, immediately . . . I'll wait for your call . . . hurry!"

About ten minutes later, the phone rang, and Chen hastened to pick it up. "Zhao Jin? What? Zhong Song, command post of the Thirty-sixth Division, command post of the 165th Brigade — they're all on that mountain-top? Fine! Wonderful!"

"This is the last height they've got, 701!" Zhao Jin's voice vibrated in the receiver. "We're going to take it very soon. Right. We'll nab Zhong Song for you. For sure!"

"I —" Chen began yelling into the phone when a shell again snapped the line.

He decided to rush to the regiment and take command personally, for capturing that mountain-top would ensure victory of the entire battle.

The phone rang again. Snatching it up, Chen shouted, "Zhao Jin?"

"Yes," was the reply, but then another voice was heard over the line. "There's no need for you to report to your brigade commander that I'm here, Zhao Jin. What's there to be afraid of? Bullets have no eyes."

General Peng! thought Chen, startled and excited. "Zhao Jin," he yelled. "Is that Number Three up there with you? See to it that he's protected. I'll be right up!" Zhao Jin was saying something to General Peng, and Chen could hear snatches of the general's quiet replies. "Very good . . . don't let up. . . . Don't worry about me. I'm no rookie still learning the rudiments from his squad leader. . . ."

Chen put down the phone and said to the commissar, "I'm going, old Yang." He started climbing out of the trench.

Yang pulled him back. "You can't leave here. I'll lead the regiment, you back me up with the artillery." The commissar refused to let Chen argue. With that special proud bearing and nimble movements of the military man, he hurried towards where the fighting was thickest. Steadily he advanced, at times running, at times rolling, at times crawling flat on the ground. Soon his figure was blotted from sight by the smoke of bursting artillery shells. . . .

At five-fifteen, Chen's brigade joined with other units in a concerted assault on the last stronghold of the Thirty-sixth Division.

The men had been fighting all day. Their throats were dry and parched, their nerves taut. The guns thundered like a mountain torrent. Under cover of heavy artillery, the bold fighters threw themselves against the enemy once, twice, a third time, a fourth. . . . Their battle cries shook the heavens and made the ears ring.

Charging with bayonets and hand grenades, they fought in hand-to-hand combat. A bugle sounded. We had taken the enemy's position! There were cheers, and the red flag waved amid the smoke and flames!

The sun had already set when our forces broke into the enemy's last position, and by the time the position was completely occupied, night had fallen.

Enemy bodies, artillery pieces, machine-guns . . . littered the field. Our troops immediately went on to mopping up. Some took count of their own ranks and reorganized. Some sorted out enemy prisoners and equipment.

A peasant guide told brigadier Chen that this height was known as Mount Feng, and that it was about four miles south of Shajiadian. Chen had one staff officer spread the map out on the ground while another illuminated it with his flashlight.

Glancing up from the map, Chen said to a few of his officers standing nearby, "Have all your units gone off mopping up?"

"Some are still here 'sweeping' the battlefield," replied one of them.

"Order them to stop. All units should be out mopping up."

Every unit of the North-west Field Army relentlessly pursued the wildly fleeing enemy.

After First Company, led by Dayong, had taken the enemy's last stronghold, it did not stop, but continued to give chase. They're scattered; their strength is gone, thought Dayong. He had each soldier tie a white handkerchief around his left arm to distinguish himself in the dark, then they pursued the enemy up and down the mountains. They would slash into the centre of any group of enemy they encountered, and fire outward. The enemy soldiers rolled down the mountains, fled from the valleys, colliding with one another in their haste. Everywhere were pack animals, corpses, wounded, artillery pieces, rifles, knapsacks, and group after group of enemy soldiers who had downed their arms and were waiting to be taken over by their captors. Each time First Company came upon such a group, Dayong sent it back to the rear, under the guard of one of his men. How many prisoners they took in this way, he had no idea.

By the time they had gone two or three miles, all that Dayong had left with him was one squad under the command of Quanyou. As he was taking count, a group of men came towards them through the darkness, and someone called softly, "Who's there?"

Dayong thought fast. Giving a shove to the men behind him and indicating that they should encircle the enemy, he replied, "Our own side!" And he walked boldly towards them.

"Which — which unit?" one of the enemy soldiers challenged timidly. "What's your designation?"

Dayong continued walking towards them. "4281, stupid. What are you howling about? I told you we're our side." He suddenly ran forward and punched one of the KMT men in the nose, felling him to the ground, then held him down with his foot.

"Who are you?" yelled the soldier, and he sank his teeth into the calf of Dayong's leg.

One of the enemy threw a hand grenade.

With one shot Dayong killed the man beneath his feet, sent him rolling with a kick, then flung himself on another dark form.

Quanyou and his men came charging into the enemy from two sides, shouting fiercely. The enemy threw hand grenades which the PLA men countered with a rain of grenades of their own.

Knocking two enemy soldiers aside, Dayong seized a man preparing to mount a white horse. But the fellow was slippery. With a twist, he wrenched himself loose and went plunging down the steep slope into the gorge below. Dayong was left holding a piece of his jacket. Flinging a few grenades after him, Dayong turned and knocked down a man who had been following the horse, and knelt on his chest.

"Who was that?" he demanded.

"Spare me! Spare me! That was Zhong Song . . . our division commander. . . ."

Dayong was furious. "Are you telling the truth?"

"I don't lie, commander! Spare me, commander, I'm a cripple. Zhong Song is wounded in three places. He's covered with blood. You see, this is his horse. I'm his groom!"

Dayong turned on his flashlight and examined the piece of jacket. It contained a pocket in which were Zhong Song's name cards, an order of commendation from Chiang Kai-shek, a radiogram from Hu Zongnan promising promotion, and other odds and ends.

"After him! Let's get that dirty bastard!" Dayong quickly led his men into the gorge, angrily muttering, "I had the son of a bitch in my hands and I let him get away!"

"Don't feel bad, commander," Jinshan consoled him. "We've wiped out the whole Thirty-sixth Division."

"Less talk and more speed!" snapped Dayong. "When we've caught Zhong Song, then we can say we've really finished the job!"

9

THE sun was already in the window of the cave when Brigadier Chen opened his eyes the next morning. He saw the commissar get up from his blanket and go out. For the moment, he couldn't remember how he had returned to the cave from the battlefield last night, how he had stretched out on this pile of hay and slept. The only thing clear in his mind was: We've won!

Still drowsy, he stretched. Every bone in his body ached and his ears still rang with the noise of battle. He coughed, and felt a dry and painful rasping in his throat. For more than ten days they had been in a whirl. Victories didn't come easy! Forced marches, wind and rain, hunger, scouting missions, assessing reports, planning, holding meetings, vows of determination, seizing favourable positions, digging fortifications, charges, hand-to-hand fighting . . . like scenes in a film, these events unrolled in Chen's mind. All were in preparation for these few hours. Whether men lived or died was decided in these few fierce hours. He could see the faces of many of his men; he thought of the regimental chief of staff, Wei Yi, how he boldly stood firm before a huge enemy onslaught, fighting with burning loyalty to the end.

In the heat of battle, one seldom stopped to mourn the death of a dear comrade and friend. But after it was over, one remembered, and wept. Thinking of Wei Yi and other comrades who had died, Chen was weighed down with grief. He got up quickly from his bed, as if to drive those unhappy thoughts from his mind.

The telephone rang and he picked it up. "Ah, good. Let Dayong bring the captured senior officers and documents here to me. At noon. Yes, reorganize the ranks. Quite right, we must replenish our ammunition immediately. Good. Get ready and continue the battle. What's that? Right, right. . . ."

Like all commanders after a battle, Chen was tired, his brain whirled, he could hardly keep his eyes open. But he whipped up his flagging energy and attended to the business at hand.

Chen went to the headquarters of Zhao Jin's regiment. The regiment's political commissar, Li Cheng, was there.

"Where's Zhao Jin?" Chen asked, his face falling.

"Over at First Battalion."

After a long silence, the brigadier said, "Wei Yi is dead!" He said no more, but his meaning was obvious — the fault is yours, you and Zhao Jin!

Li Cheng made no reply. He knew it was a baseless plaint, but he knew that it came from the depths of Chen's grief.

Chen walked to the door, then turned and looked at the commissar's thin dark face. "We must think of the living. We have no right to be miserable over those who have fallen. Of course —" He put forth his left hand and pressed it down in a vigorous sweep, unable to say any more. He was sorry he had mentioned Wei Yi again. Obviously, he wanted to change the subject.

"Li Cheng," he said, "have a staff officer escort me to First Battalion. I want to see my soldiers."

Not long after the brigadier left, Wei Yi's brother, Wei Gang, and Wei Yi's orderly came in to regimental headquarters. Wei Gang's head and neck were bandaged.

"So you're back?" said the commissar.

"I just got out of the hospital. Got back late last night. They put me up in the political department."

"I know all that. What I want to know is why you didn't stay in the hospital a few more days? Why have you come back so soon?"

Wei Gang dropped his eyes. "Soon? No, I've come back too late."

Li Cheng, usually steady as a big old tree, was shaken. He put his hands on Wei Gang's shoulders and looked him in the eye. His voice shook a little as he said:

"We can stand even greater blows than this, Wei Gang. We can stand them. . . ."

The resemblance between the two brothers was so striking, it seemed to Li Cheng that Wei Yi was standing before him, not Wei Gang . . . Wei Yi hunching his shoulders and saying, "Commissar, the men's morale is high. . . ."

Li Cheng saw the orderly taking up Wei Yi's quilt, and he thought automatically — he's making Wei Yi's bed. Even now, he couldn't believe that Wei Yi, so full of life and vitality, could have left his work and comrades for ever. No, it was simply impossible!

"The chief of staff only had this old quilt, commissar Li," said the orderly. "We're going to wrap him in it. Do you want to take one last look at him before we close the coffin?"

"No," said Li Cheng harshly.

The orderly stood undecided.

"I won't look! I won't look!" the commissar shouted. "Go! Get out!" He paced the floor very rapidly.

Suddenly Wei Gang leaned his head against the wall and burst into sobs. "Brother, why did it have to be you? Why couldn't it have been me instead!"

"A wonderful man has fallen." Li Cheng said, half to himself. "The Party needed him, needed him very much." His heart beat painfully and the blood seemed to race through his veins. He gazed dully at a corner of the room. Wei Gang left, but Li Cheng didn't see him go.

A rifle volley on the mountain-side rang out sharply, **and** then many voices rose in song, deeply sorrowful voices:

Arise, ye prisoners of starvation,
Arise, ye wretched of the earth. . . .

Li Cheng stood at attention, hot tears streaming from his eyes.

He stood thus, woodenly, for more than half an hour.

Then he walked to the door of the cave. Long lines of enemy prisoners under escort were filing by, coming out of the gorge. PLA men were busy along the river flats. On the mountains, guerillas and local peasants searched for abandoned enemy arms and ammunition.

Li Cheng lit a cigarette. He dragged deeply on it several times, then went off to inspect the companies.

Only by plunging into work could he forget his pain!

Li Cheng followed along the little path through the mountain gorge for about two hundred yards to where it made a turn. There he met brigade commissar Yang.

Yang turned his shining eyes upon him. "Our armies under General Chen are pounding at the gate of the Tongguan Pass. They'll soon be thrusting right into Hu Zongnan's old lair!" Turning, he pointed into the depths of the gorge. "Look at that, Li Cheng!"

PLA soldiers were scrambling to read news circulars which had just been distributed. They shouted and cheered:

"All of Chen army have crossed the Yellow River!"

A powerful emotion gripped Li Cheng's heart. We pay a tremendous price but we win in the end, he thought.

Chapter Six

Enemy Debacle

1

THE general offensive began. The PLA fighters swarmed over the mountains and through the valleys, driving south in hot pursuit of the enemy. Bulletins of various sizes and colours circulated among the marching men. Their substance was as follows:

After Hu Zongnan's pride and joy, the Thirty-sixth Division, was smashed by the North-west Field Army, the seven and a half brigades led by Dong Zhao and Liu Kan were like ants on a hot griddle. They were now concentrated in the northern sector of Mizhi County, milling around in the mountains. This sector was sparsely populated and produced little grain. Moreover, this time of the year, autumn, it rained two days out of three. The enemy-troops were cold and starving, terrified that they would suffer the same fate as the Thirty-sixth. Meanwhile, our armies under General Chen had crossed the Yellow River into western Henan, then fanned out in powerful thrusts which threatened Luoyang and Tongguan; even Hu Zongnan's old base, Xian, was like a sinking ship. The entire enemy line of fifty to sixty thousand men along the Wuding River north of the city of Mizhi was beginning to withdraw, building fortifications along the way to cover their retreat. They were intending to flee back to Yanan. . . .

General Peng Dehuai led the main force of the Northwest Field Army in a race south through the region bounded on the east by the Yellow River and on the west by the Yulin-Xianyang Highway, to head off the enemy and catch them out in the open somewhere in the neighbourhood of Yanan. He sent another column across the Wuding to harass the enemy continuously from the right flank as they withdrew down the highway. This column was to delay the enemy, sap their strength, make them pay dearly for every step of the retreat.

In the mind of every man in the flanking column, from the soldiers to the commanding general, there was only one thought: Get ahead of the enemy!

Day and night, the men marched. Now the vanguard of the flanking column reached Jiuli Mountain, between Suide and Qingjian. This height was located along the very neck of the highway. The enemy had to pass through here to reach Yanan.

In a pouring rain, the PLA men began building fortifications on Jiuli Mountain.

The highway came through a narrow ravine north of the mountain, climbed a twisting course along the slope, then descended into another ravine on the south side. There was no plainly discernible mountain range here — just a collection of rising heights, with Jiuli Mountain, higher and flatter than the surrounding peaks, plumped athwart the highway.

There were less than three thousand men in the PLA unit directly facing the enemy at Jiuli Mountain, but these were being called upon to forge their courage and skill into a wall of bronze and hold up nearly sixty thousand enemy troops for a week.

Firing began at dawn. With the odds twenty to one against them, the PLA fighters plunged into battle.

Zhao Jin's regiment and another regiment of the column held the side of the mountain facing the enemy. They fought from dusk to dawn, from sunrise to sunset, while the autumn rain poured down without a let-up.

At noon, the PLA troops captured a mountain-top and took a number of prisoners. The average enemy soldier by now was so thin he looked like a bag of bones.

Dayong sent his company's prisoners down the mountain under escort. He observed Brigadier Chen approaching.

Soaking wet, his uniform all spattered, Chen strode rapidly through the soupy mud. Days of continuous bitter battle had turned his face gaunt and sallow. On his cheeks were whiskers half an inch long, from which rain water dripped. His sleepless eyes were bloodshot. But he was still brimming with good cheer, as if exhaustion, hardship, hunger, the rain and the cold didn't bother him a bit.

From the time the battle started, Chen was constantly on the move, inspecting each position the various units of his brigade held on Jiuli Mountain. Sometimes he would suddenly show up in the trenches, or at a place where an assault was about to be launched, or in the thick of an enemy artillery barrage, and lead the men through an ugly situation.

Now, as he drew near, he hailed the men. "Having a tough time, comrades?"

"Doesn't amount to much, 701."

Chen was delighted with the men's valour. "You're right. We've got our trouble, but the enemy's got 'em worse. Some of their units haven't eaten for three days. Besides, our problems are only temporary. We can solve 'em."

Arriving at the command post of Zhao Jin's regiment, he asked abruptly, "Where's Zhang Youqiang?" His face was hard and icy.

"He's gone to Third Battalion," Zhao Jin replied.

"Get him back here immediately."

Zhao Jin telephoned Third Battalion's command post.

A staff officer spread a military map upon the ground. Chen knelt on one knee and, leaning on his hands, examined the map. After a while he raised his head and said a few words in a low voice. Then he drew out a cigarette case, extracted a cigarette, tapped it vigorously on the case and lit up. As he smoked, he silently pondered.

Zhang Youqiang was a staff officer in Zhao Jin's regiment until Wei Yi was killed in the battle of Shajiadian. Since then he had been acting as the regiment's assistant chief of staff.

An hour before, Chen had telephoned to Zhao Jin's regiment to send a battalion on a mission into enemy territory. Zhang Youqiang had happened to answer the phone. He talked a lot about difficulties, claiming it was impossible to pull any battalion out of its present position. Only after Chen criticized him severely did he, grumbling and with poor grace, agree to carry out the order.

Zhang Youqiang came into the dug-out, sopping wet, his hat dripping rain water.

His eyes on the wall, Chen questioned him. "Let's hear it. Just how big are your difficulties?"

If I explain, the brigadier's sure to understand, thought Zhang. One by one, he itemized the regiment's troubles. In conclusion he said, "All these problems are tough ones. The fighting is very severe. At the regimental command post alone, we had three hand grenade duels with the enemy!"

Chen's granite-like chin trembled angrily. Fixing steely eyes on Zhang, he quoted, " 'We're short of men. If we pull a battalion out of line now, it will be very hard for our regiment to hold out.' Isn't that what you said?"

"It really is hard. Actually —"

"Hard? What are we here for, if not to overcome hardships?" Chen stared at Zhang for a full minute, then said coldly, "You have none of the courage of the men!" His voice shook with emotion.

Chen strode out of the dug-out and stood in the trench, facing north, where artillery fire was heavy. Zhang and Zhao Jin followed out after him.

Zhao Jin was used to the sound of orders. He had a military man's heart and habits. The peremptory and harsh tone of Chen's criticism, therefore, did not disturb him. What did pain him, and severely, was his own failure to carry out his duties.

A stern, unhappy expression on his face, he cried, "Brigadier, I think you know we have the courage to look our mistakes squarely in the face!"

Chen's glance softened. "Your regiment's Party committee should make it clear to every man: If we dare to win, we shall win!"

Zhao Jin had fought beside Chen for many years. They had been together on the Long March, they had walked into artillery barrages shoulder to shoulder. A strong comradeship had grown up between them. If you were faithful to your responsibilities, valued them more than your life, the brigadier supported and encouraged you — Zhao Jin knew that well. When a fighter fell, Chen was too miserable to take even a mouthful of water or a bite of food. If you were wounded, Chen would stay at the phone all night, waiting for a report from the hospital; no matter how busy he was, he would get on his horse and rush to see you. "You must save him," he would say to the doctor. "The most precious thing the Party has entrusted me with is our men." But if you wavered or drew back, if you failed to carry out orders, the brigadier would unhesitatingly treat you according to the rules of discipline.

The rain was coming down harder than ever. Fog enveloped the mountain-top. Visibility was limited to about ten yards. But the rifle and artillery fire never stopped.

"Zhao Jin," said Chen, "remember — you're to send a battalion into enemy territory tonight." He pointed at the mountain due north of Jiuli Mountain. "Let them attack over there. Let them co-ordinate with our frontal blockade to delay the enemy from fleeing south. That will give General Peng and our main force time to get into position near Yanan and smash the enemy when they finally get there. Then our army under General Chen will be able to advance into western Henan without any worries."

As Chen walked off towards the thick of artillery fire, Zhao Jin watched him until he disappeared.

2

ZHAO JIN entered the dug-out and telephoned to the front to ask commissar Li Cheng to return to the regimental command post.

Li Cheng soon appeared, covered with mud and reeking of gun-powder. His lip was cut and bleeding. The orderly handed him a cup of water. He drank it avidly, some of it dribbling down his chin.

Zhao Jin told him of Chen's instructions, adding, "Let Dayong take a battalion tonight and go into enemy territory." He then telephoned the regiment's various battalions and directed them each to pull out one company; these were to combine into a special task force.

"First Company is quite near here," Li Cheng said to a

messenger. "Tell commander Dayong and instructor Chengde we want to see them and that they are to recall First Company from the front lines." Li Cheng hastened off to brigade headquarters.

Dayong and Chengde came to the regimental command post on the double. The messenger had given them a hint of the mission Zhao Jin had in mind for them, and they entered the dug-out very excited.

To Chengde, Zhao Jin said, "You are to stay here and help the political instructor lead the First Battalion." To Dayong, he said, "You will lead three companies to operate inside the enemy lines." Zhao Jin spoke very simply. Just as in battle a man will use a simple gesture to convey a word of meaning, or use two or three words to express a complicated thought.

"Good," replied Dayong. His voice was even.

Zhao Jin hesitated, then he said, "First Battalion hasn't many men right now. If you go off with First Company, the battalion will be even more depleted. So you'd better leave one of your platoons behind."

Dayong looked stricken.

One platoon less and see how pained he is! thought Zhao Jin. Still you can't blame him. One soldier is doing the work of ten, and he really can't afford to spare any. . . . But to Dayong he said sternly, "Snap out of it! First Company has more men than any other company."

"Well, all right then, we'll leave the First Platoon."

The telephone rang shrilly. Zhao Jin picked it up to hear the urgent voice of the assistant commander of the Second Battalion.

"The enemy is pressing us hard. We've already thrown back seven assaults. . . . We're short of men and munitions. . . . The battalion C.O. has been wounded in the left arm. When

I asked him to go down, he nearly bit my head off. . . . Number 41, send us a few reinforcements, just one squad even. . . ."

"Calm down," snapped Zhao Jin. "I'm not going to send you a single man and you're going to hold out. Do you hear that?" He slammed down the receiver and walked out of the dug-out. Dayong and Chengde followed after him.

Zhao Jin stood by the communications trench, his angry eyes fixed on the high mountain to the left. It was swathed in mist, and from it the sound of rifle and artillery fire came in steady roar. Turning, he said gravely to Dayong:

"Where are your men?"

"Beneath that bluff on the right."

Zhao Jin watched the raging battle on the height. Without diverting his gaze, he called, "Messenger! Tell First Company's First Platoon to come up here, on the double!"

A minute later, First Platoon, with Jiangguo at its head, arrived on the run. Jiangguo's forehead was wrinkled in thought. He knew he was bearing a heavy responsibility and so he did his best to appear serious. But he never could quite succeed in concealing his carefree nature and love of a good joke.

"Is this the whole platoon?" Zhao Jin asked him.

Jiangguo stood rigidly at attention. "Report. This is the whole platoon."

"How many men have you?"

Taking a step forward, Jiangguo replied in ringing tones, enunciating every syllable, "Including me, a total of seven men." His red face shone with pride, and his eyes, fixed on Zhao Jin, seemed to say, "This is a big platoon, commander. The best of any in the regiment."

Zhao Jin glanced at Jiangguo, standing there with such boldness and confidence; then he jumped into the communications trench and plunged into the dug-out. He turned the crank of the field telephone twice.

"Second Detachment," he said, "I'm going immediately —" The line was cut! Zhao Jin put down the phone and came out of the dug-out.

"Let's go!" he called to the men of the First Platoon, and led them at a rapid pace towards the smoke-covered position on the left flank.

It was a dark night. Rain fell heavily.

Dayong set out with the three companies. Supporting one another, the soldiers descended Jiuli Mountain through the slippery mud. They came down the west side of the mountain, then turned north-east, intending to cut through a gap between two of the enemy's forces and work their way into a mountainous region behind the enemy lines.

After travelling north about a mile, the PLA men came to a narrow ravine flanked by two high mountains. Enemy fire was pouring down into the entrance to the ravine, sealing it off tight. Stopped, the PLA men lay motionless in the mud. Dayong took four soldiers and went off to reconnoitre. They crept forward until they met a road block. Dayong pushed his cap to the back of his head, wiped the rain from his face, thought things over, then continued to lead his men on. Even though it was very dark, they were able to take careful note of the terrain they covered. Long battle experience had made them familiar with all kinds of terrain and had sharpened their perceptions. Even when it was so dark that they couldn't see their hands before their face, they nevertheless could distinguish clearly between friend and foe.

Before long, Dayong had a clear picture of the situation. There was an enemy battalion on the mountain-top. Midway down the slope the enemy manned two heavy machine-guns which kept up a steady stream of fire against the entrance to the ravine.

Dayong sent Ma Quanyou to knock out the machine-gun position. "Take only two or three men with you," he said. "The more men the bigger the target. After you finish the job let me know right away. As soon as I hear from you I'll take our battalion in an all-out dash deep into enemy territory. Remember, Quanyou, every second counts!"

Taking Jinshan and his younger brother Erzi, Quanyou skilfully worked his way up to the enemy machine-gun nest and finished it off with tommy-guns and hand grenades.

Dayong promptly led his men in a plunge into the ravine going north.

It was still raining. Enemy soldiers on the surrounding peaks yelled and shouted wildly. After travelling about a mile, Dayong and his men ran into some KMT troops. But the PLA kept going, fighting as they advanced, until gradually the yells and sound of firing were left behind them.

By dawn they reached a narrow gorge north-east of Jiuli Mountain. There, except for a few men posted as guards, the entire battalion went to sleep in the shelter of an overhanging cliff.

Dayong couldn't sleep. They were in the midst of tens of thousands of the enemy and in danger of being encircled at any moment. He paced beside the little stream running through the gorge, deep in thought.

The following night, Dayong first led his men in a strong attack on an enemy unit. Then he had the three companies attack three different enemy positions separately, after which the companies regrouped at a pre-arranged place. By then dawn was breaking.

Seated beneath a cliff, Dayong pondered. Quanyou, acting commander of one of the companies, sat beside him, sleeping, his back propped against a rock. Dayong glanced at him from time to time.

Dayong's face wore a look of gravity out of keeping with his twenty-four years, as if war had brought him an early maturity. He now seemed able to analyse and solve complicated and important problems in the twinkling of an eye. His every move was beginning to be possessed of a coolness born of experience. Physically, he was full of vitality, and this vitality added to his courage and inventiveness.

At the same time the commander of Company Nine came rushing down the slope after checking the guard. "Wei Gang, hurry!" he shouted. "Dayong's waiting for us!"

Wei Gang's head and neck were swathed in bandages. With his left hand steadying the Mauser pistol bouncing on his hip, he bounded down the slope.

"Did you give the enemy a good drubbing last night, Commander Wang?" he cried. Without waiting for a reply, he continued, "It was a real pleasure! After we left you last night, our company climbed to the top of a mountain, and guess what? — We ran into an artillery command post. We let 'em have our grenades. What a beautiful plastering! We gave it to the bastards good and hot! I tell you, if I wasn't afraid of going against the battalion C.O.'s orders last night, we would have kept right on digging deeper into enemy territory!"

"You make a much better company commander than political instructor," said Wang.

"That's right. I'm not patient enough for a political instructor. Commissar Li Cheng has ticked me off plenty on account of that!"

After the officers summoned to attend the meeting had all arrived, Dayong analysed the enemy's situation. "What should our next step be?" he asked, in conclusion.

"We ought to stay under cover during the day and operate only at night," Wei Gang proposed. "The enemy has to pay a stiff price for everything at night. Every time we hit 'em in the dark we wipe out a whole gang of them!"

Wei Gang looked at Dayong, hoping for his support. But Dayong was thoughtfully gazing at the stream.

The commander of Company Nine shook his head. "We can get away with it once or twice, but that's all. We can't keep operating in this region. . . ."

Wei Gang immediately jumped to his feet to argue.

Dayong made a pressing motion with his hand. "Keep your shirt on, Wei Gang. About seven miles to the south-west is Jiuli Mountain. If we can stir things up here that will help our main force over there. But there's something in what Company Nine's commander says. The bait looks sweet enough, but if you sink your teeth into it you're liable to feel the hook."

"Well, what do you think we ought to do?" Quanyou demanded.

Dayong plucked a blade of grass and chewed on it, his eyes fixed on the cliff. Finally he said, "In battle, at certain times and under certain conditions, the most dangerous place becomes the safest. We ought to continue north, deeper into the enemy lines. This may seem dangerous, but it will put us in a much better position to strike than we are here, and it'll be safer in the long run."

Wei Gang hotly disagreed. "That will never do. According to you, we scrap our original plan completely!"

"It's our plan. We made it and we can change it. It's settled then — We'll advance another three miles into enemy territory. All right. Keep the guards alert. We march at dark."

3

THAT night, Dayong and his battalion stole quietly north.

A detachment under Quanyou went ahead to scout. At a bend in the gorge they nabbed three enemy deserters. The KMT soldiers revealed that two miles north of the ridge, in a village called Lijia Hollow, the administrative and service detachments of a brigade were stationed; there were very few combat troops and a great deal of equipment and munitions. Quanyou immediately reported this news to Dayong.

Dayong again questioned the prisoners, in detail. After thinking the matter over, he decided to stage a raid. He led his men to the top of a high mountain, where they could see in all directions. There was heavy firing to the south. To the north and east, the enemy had lit large bonfires. To the east and west, the enemy shot one flare bomb after another into the night sky. What the devil were they up to?

Dayong divided his men into three units. He led Companies One and Six into the gorge, marching north-west. Company Nine remained on the mountain-top to give cover.

At three in the morning Dayong and his two companies entered a small village and opened fire. The sound of the shooting sent the enemy garrison into a panic. Men trampled men; horses trampled horses.

Driving in, the PLA force saw a group of enemy soldiers fleeing towards a hamlet to the north of the gorge. They gave chase. Suddenly a man came rushing down the slope.

"Hey!" he cried. "Are you the guard?"

Dayong thought fast. "That's right. You must be the messenger from brigade headquarters. Here. Have a cigarette." Whistling, he strolled up to the KMT soldier.

The man stamped with exasperation. "Hurry, can't you! The chief of staff is just about ready to blow his top. He's been cursing you something fierce. Hurry up!"

Dayong laughed to himself. Meat on the table! He feigned concern. "We've been worried because we couldn't find him. Where is he? Take us to him." He patted the messenger familiarly on the shoulder.

The messenger led them to a small walled compound.

With one blow of his fist, Quanyou knocked the messenger rolling to the ground and snatched his gun.

Dayong waved his hand. Company Six, under Wei Gang, climbed to positions on the roof-tops. Dayong led Quanyou's detachment swiftly into the room where an oil lamp was burning.

As he came through the door, Dayong swept the interior of the room with his eyes. A man who was evidently an officer was fuming angrily, "Disgraceful, absolutely disgraceful! That guards detachment is absolutely useless! Quick, quick, send someone up to the mountain-top for a look. Maybe we've mistaken some of our own troops in the dark. Everyone's so damned trigger-happy! . . . And as for you, you're no bodyguard, you're an idiot! You've lost my briefcase! I had a catty of biscuits in that briefcase!" He aimed a kick at the bodyguard, then paced the floor, wringing his hands.

Quanyou trained his gun on the bodyguard in the corner. Dayong jumped forward and grabbed the officer by the collar with such force that he nearly lifted him off the ground.

"Who are you?" he demanded, prodding the officer with his pistol.

The officer gaped, open-mouthed, his gold teeth flashing.

"I am a colonel and assistant chief of staff," he replied with accustomed hauteur. "I am in charge of this brigade command post by order of the brigadier-general. Who are you that you dare be so rude? What is this — mutiny?"

Torn between revulsion and a desire to laugh, Dayong tightened his grip on the officer's collar. "Come out of your dreams, man," he snapped. "We're the PLA and we've got you surrounded. You couldn't get out of here if you sprouted wings. Order all the units under your command to assemble on that field outside the compound gate immediately. If you say anything but 'yes,' I'll smash your skull to a jelly!"

Dayong shook him by the collar and pointed his pistol at the bridge of the officer's nose. "If you want to die, I'll finish you off right now! If you want to live, do what you're told and get your men assembled outside!" Dayong's voice was powerful and menacing.

The colonel looked into the icy pistol muzzle and grew dizzy. "I've practically no men left," he lied weakly. "They've all been scattered. All right, I'll obey orders. My only combat soldiers are a squad of guards. Right, I'll obey orders!" In a hopeless despondent voice, he muttered, "They've dropped out of the sky, they've simply dropped right out of the sky!" He stared wildly around him in disbelief.

Cocking his pistol, Dayong stood with both legs apart, solidly, as if he had struck root. The colonel instinctively recoiled when his eyes met Dayong's merciless gaze, and he dropped his hands helplessly at his sides.

Finally he issued the order and assembled the entire brigade headquarters' company. There were over one hundred men, including "political officers," administrative staff, medical personnel, cooks, grooms, and so on.

The PLA soldiers quickly disarmed the enemy.

Dayong had Quanyou take the enemy colonel outside. The moment they went through the door, the officer twisted away, dashed down the lane and fled along the stream. Standing on the edge of the bluff, Dayong fired once in the direction of the running footsteps. There was a cry of pain followed by groans. Dayong fired again.

A soldier shone his flashlight into the ravine. "Good shooting," he said. "That colonel has gone to the American heaven to get his reward."

Just then, the PLA troops covering from the mountain-top sounded the signal to withdraw. Dayong and his men set fire to the enemy arms, munitions and equipment and, escorting their prisoners, hurried up the mountain.

As they reached the summit, heavy firing broke out on the mountain-top to their left. Suspicious, Dayong continued leading his men at a run towards the pre-arranged meeting place. Suddenly, a PLA messenger appeared. He was panting so hard he could hardly catch his breath.

"We're in bad trouble, commander Dayong. Commander Wang's company has got tangled up with the enemy reinforcements and can't get out!"

After getting more details on Company Nine's situation, Dayong first directed ten of his soldiers to take the prisoners to the secluded spot in the gorge where the PLA men had rested the day before. Then he said to the remaining men:

"Comrades, Company Nine is pinned down by the enemy. We're going to help them out!"

Led by Dayong, the PLA troops hurried towards where the artillery shells were falling the thickest. They slashed into the enemy flank, forcing the KMT force to relieve its pressure on Company Nine.

Just before dawn, Dayong sent a messenger to tell Wang to prepare for a joint counter-assault before it was light enough for the enemy to see clearly. If they could drive the enemy into the ravine, they would be able to make a getaway. But, in spite of several attempts, the messenger failed to get through to the beleaguered company commander.

Fighting as they withdrew, Company Nine managed to shake off the enemy before the sun came up.

Companies One and Six, however, because of unfavourable terrain, had not been able to break off the engagement. Well over a thousand enemy troops, supported by strong artillery fire, pressed in on them step by step.

The fighting grew more bitter. The PLA men were outnumbered several dozen to one!

After noon, the situation became even worse for the defenders. In spite of the bad weather, three enemy fighter planes joined the attack. Dayong and his men were now fighting off an entire regiment.

The PLA men kept moving back towards higher ground. At the top of a ridge, Dayong looked around. Before them were the enemy, behind was a bottomless abyss. Both to the left and to the right, the mountain-sides sheered off in steep drops. They had reached a dead end! To Dayong, who had been through many a trial, this wasn't much of a shock. He remained calm. But Wei Gang became very upset. He breathed hard and his face turned brick-red. "Fight those traitor bastards to the death!" he cried, hopping with rage. He was ready to fling himself forward in a headlong charge.

Dayong directed Quanyou to hold back the enemy with First Company. Then he examined the surrounding mountains through his field glasses. He knew from experience that this was the time for cool sober thinking. An idea flashed into his mind. Why not use the men's knapsack cords and puttees to make a long rope and have the soldiers slide down into the gorge one by one? Then he thought — No good. Even if we all got down, it's still daylight. The enemy could pour their fire on us from above! The only thing to do is get part of our troops out first. . . . He ordered Wei Gang to collect the cords and puttees and twist a thick strong rope.

"You take Company Six down —" he started to say to Wei Gang.

Wei Gang shouted as if he were being seared by fire, "All of you go! Let me hold off the enemy alone. I can do it alone!"

"Don't answer back. Obey orders," snapped Dayong. "Take Company Six down and hide in a dark ravine, over there." He pointed to the west, a mountainous region behind the enemy. "As soon as it's dark, slip up to the enemy's rear and hit them hard. Remember, there's nothing a KMT soldier fears more than firing from behind him. In the dark, a sudden attack by even a few men is very effective. Go! Be cautious and use your head. Carry out this mission as long as there's a breath left in your body!"

There were very few men remaining in the company by now, so it didn't take very long for Wei Gang and his men to slide down the rope into the gorge.

We must hold out until dark, thought Dayong. This narrow ridge makes us bunch up into a good target for artillery fire, but it doesn't give the enemy any room to outflank us either.

He ordered the men to dig in and fight. Don't give an inch. Fight for time.

In spite of the ferocity of the struggle, Dayong was happy, and the longer it lasted, the happier he became. For the time was soon coming when the enemy would get a taste of a blast from the rear.

At the moment though, not only were the enemy attacking all along the ridge, but they were also bombarding it with an assortment of big guns from the mountain-tops to the left and right. Shells were blasting craters within craters in our position, and the yellow earth was scorched black. The faces of the men were grimed with soot like the bottoms of cooking pots. Time and again the defenders were buried under by exploding shells, but each time they rolled out again. An experienced fighter is worth ten rookies any time, thought Dayong.

The cheerful note in Dayong's voice as he shouted his orders had a calming effect on the men.

Enemy artillery fire never ceased, and the KMT troops staged one assault after another. Whenever they drew near, Dayong called for a concentration of fire and a deluge of hand grenades.

Each time the enemy was beaten back, no matter how small a victory had been won, even if it meant the death of only one KMT soldier, Dayong gained in confidence and boldness.

About half an hour before dusk, dark clouds began to gather in the sky.

Seated beside Dayong, Li Yuming, leader of Squad One, was bandaging his neck.

"Can you keep going, Yuming?" Dayong asked him.

"I'm all right, commander." He pulled a packet out of his pocket. "Here are five thousand yuan. If I fall in battle, this can count as my last payment of Party dues."

Dayong refused to accept the money. In the past, before battles, soldiers often gave their diaries or other prized possessions to their political instructor, saying, "I want to leave these to the Party as a remembrance," or "Please be sure and turn these over to Chairman Mao." Dayong didn't recall how instructor Chengde had treated such offers in the past. As for himself today he was acting as commander and political instructor concurrently, and Yuming's proposal didn't move him in the least; in fact, it annoyed him exceedingly.

He was thinking of saying, in his usual forthright manner, "Take back your money, Yuming. I forbid you to act like this!" But he controlled his impulse, and merely asked instead, "What makes you think this is your last payment of Party dues?"

"Nobody's head is cased in iron, commander," replied Yuming. "During a battle, anything can happen. Paying my Party dues for the last time now, if I die I'll have no regrets."

Dayong shook his head. "That's the wrong way to think. You should have confidence in your own strength. I can knock over those running dogs of America; they can't hurt me — that's how you should feel.... Say, we'd better keep an eye on that machine-gun position of Erzi's.... You should think — I can wipe out the enemy, I can come back and pay my Party dues; after the battle I'm going to take part in the victory celebration, and comrades will point at me and say, 'He's a real soldier of the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Area!' — What are those enemy troops yelling about? — You've been decorated, Yuming. Our company has won the pennant for 'Courage and Grit' four times. Remember your honour! Remember the honour of the company! Look! Over there! The enemy is making a charge!"

It was nearly dark. The enemy knew that night was no

friend of theirs, so they concentrated their entire strength in an effort to crush the PLA men quickly.

Dayong was losing men steadily. Each PLA soldier was holding off more than a hundred KMT troops.

The enemy assaulted in waves. Intense bombardment shook the earth. Rifle bullets hummed through the air like a swarm of bees. Yells and screams rose in intensity. It was a bedlam that made men's heads spin; it blurred their eyes, it paralyzed their nerves. . . .

Quanyou's face was black as the bottom of a pot. His eyes flashed fire. His tough wiry body was charged with energy.

"Take some of the men and go down the rope, commander," he proposed. "Leave a few with me to cover your withdrawal. If the worst comes to worst. . . ." He glanced at the abyss behind them.

"You'll jump the cliff, is that it?" demanded Dayong. "You're out of your mind! You're not a soldier, or a squad or platoon leader now, you're an acting company commander! You have to think for the whole company. — Look, why is Jinshan firing from that position? Quick, quick, make him turn to the right! — Hold out another fifteen or twenty minutes, Quanyou, and we'll all go down together."

Dayong and his men fought on. He didn't have to lead them any longer. Each man was his own commander. Whoever had a breath left in his body kept firing, throwing grenades. The old wound in Dayong's head split open. He yanked off his cap and used it to wipe the blood running down his face, then went on throwing grenades. Enemy grenades, he picked up nimbly and flung back. They exploded almost as soon as they left his hand.

An artillery shell burst to his left. He jumped into its crater and, an instant later, the place he had just vacated was struck by several missiles. The concussion of a shell exploding behind him threw him to the foot of the ridge.

"The commander's been killed," cried a soldier.

"Nonsense," yelled Quanyou. He didn't even turn his head. "Comrades, I'm taking over!"

Dayong crawled to his feet. "I'm over here, comrades!" he shouted at the top of his voice.

The PLA men threw back over twenty enemy assaults, big and small. Their ammunition was nearly gone. They had only three or four bullets left apiece. Some were armed only with a single hand grenade. It looked as if they'd be finished in another few minutes!

Quanyou's rage mounted. There was a roaring in his ears. Glowering fiercely, he shouted, "Fight to the end!"

Dayong ran forward a few steps. "Comrades," he cried. "Don't give an inch!"

The fighters rose to their feet and met the enemy's charge with the cold steel of their bayonets. . . .

At dusk, flocks of birds, returning to their nests, flew swiftly across the darkening sky. Fires flickered in the distance. There was heavy booming of cannon, and the thunder of exploding shells.

"Commander," said Quanyou, "that trick of Wei Gang's may not work. You'd better take some men and go down the rope."

Holding a hand grenade, Dayong was watching the enemy position, staring at the dark mountain behind it. He didn't move a muscle.

"Go ahead," Quanyou urged. "I'll cover you."

Still no response from Dayong. He was listening with every nerve for the sound of firing from the enemy's rear.

Bad luck, he thought. Wei Gang probably couldn't make it. Dayong had the fighters bury their dead comrades and lower the wounded into the gorge by means of the rope.

"Quanyou," he said finally, "take two men and cover us a couple of minutes. I'm going down with the rest. You follow us immediately."

"Right. Go ahead. Be quick."

Dayong drew his troops together. Just as they were lowering the rope, the enemy drove right through the centre of their position, cutting off Dayong and the men from Quanyou and his two soldiers.

Dayong could see it all clearly. Although he himself had very few men left at his command, Quanyou had only two soldiers to help him. They obviously were in a hopeless position. For the first time that day, Dayong could feel his temper getting the better of him.

In the twilight, visibility was now limited to about ten paces. Dayong and his men kept fighting, doing their best to withdraw towards Quanyou and the two soldiers at the edge of the cliff on the left. But there was no sign of action from any of the three. Has something gone wrong with them? Dayong wondered.

Suddenly there was a volley of rifle fire from behind the enemy's ranks, followed by a series of grenade explosions in very rapid order. Terrified, the enemy turned and ran, colliding with one another in panic, yelling as if the sky had fallen.

"Hah! Rifle fire!" Dayong sprang to his feet.

"After them, comrades!" The PLA men ran west along the ridge in pursuit of the enemy.

Red and green enemy signal rockets sailed into the sky; flare bombs, hanging almost motionless aloft, hurt the eyes with the intensity of their glare. Dayong could see the enemy fleeing in hordes. The mountain ridge was littered with enemy bodies, knapsacks, cartridge cases, hand grenades, stretchers, fox-holes. . . .

Slinging their rifles across their backs, the PLA fighters picked up the U.S. tommy-guns the enemy had abandoned and fired them at the routed KMT soldiers. They mowed them down with a vengeance.

Dayong and his men chased the enemy over several heights. Then they ran into Wei Gang and the others.

Wei Gang threw his arms around Dayong. "Commander! It was beautiful, beautiful! We pounded the enemy into a jelly! This night fighting is the real stuff! Let's keep after 'em, commander!"

"No, this is far enough. Call all our men back immediately and prepare for an enemy counter-blow." Dayong thought a moment. "We must go back right now. The wounded are waiting for us beneath that bluff." Suddenly, his heart contracted. It just occurred to him that during the chase he had seen no sign of Quanyou and his two men.

They all returned to the ridge, but the ones they were seeking were not there. Perhaps they've gone down into the gorge, thought Dayong. He and the men descended the rope. It was so dark you couldn't see the man next to you, and they had to go down very slowly. At last, their clothing torn by brambles, their hands lacerated, the soles of their shoes badly scraped, they found themselves on a ledge. They still hadn't reached bottom! It can't be much further, thought Dayong. He tossed a stone and listened. It didn't sound as if they were very high. He ordered the men to follow him in a jump of the remaining distance. . . .

It turned out to be another twenty feet to the ground!

After Quanyou had been cut off from Dayong and the others, he and his two men continued to fight. Fortunately,

three sides of the height they occupied were sheer cliffs. The enemy could only attack from the narrow front. Still, three men holding off several hundred is, after all, a tremendous task.

The enemy pressed them hard. They were in a very dangerous position. They fired; they threw their grenades. . . .

Gradually, they were forced back to the edge of the cliff. Their grenades were gone, their bullets were finished. In a moment they'd be faced with two alternatives — to die gloriously, or to hold out their necks and wait for the enemy's axe!

Quanyou gripped his rifle. Biting his lips, he stamped his feet in rage. A blood-curdling thought flashed through his brain: Jump the cliff!

Ning Erzi and Liang Zhiqing clung to him tightly by the arms. Quanyou stood straight as a rod, staring at the enemy. We're letting them off too cheaply, dying this way, he thought. If we only had some more bullets, we could take a few more enemy lives with us.

"Throw your rifles over!" he ordered. The two men flung their weapons into the gorge. Holding his own rifle by the barrel, Quanyou smashed its butt against the ground, but the gun didn't break. He whirled and gripped Zhiqing's shoulder.

"Are you a Communist?"

"Yes, commander."

Quanyou's eyes looked towards the cliff. "The Party needs your loyalty."

Zhiqing gazed at him hesitantly for a full ten seconds. Then he walked to the edge, and jumped. . . .

Erzi threw his arms around Quanyou's waist. "Commander," he cried. "Live or die, let's do it together!"

Quanyou pushed him aside.

Wrapping his arms around his head, Erzi rolled over the side!

At that moment, the enemy charged, yelling and shooting as they came. Quanyou flung his useless weapon in their face. Startled, the enemy soldiers dropped to the ground. Quanyou was at the edge now. Like a man diving into the water, he leaped head-first over the cliff....

4

DAYONG was unconscious for some time after he jumped from the ledge. When he recovered, together with Wei Gang and the men, he groped his way to the foot of the cliff, finding the dead and severely wounded comrades. Then they advanced to the valley on the east side of Jiuli Mountain. North of here were the enemy; to the south was a gorge leading to the wide valley in Qingjian County. They had come out of enemy territory.

Entering a ravine, they saw a number of abandoned caves. They were now full of refugee peasants. Imagine meeting friends in the depths of the mountains!

The peasants immediately set to work boiling drinking water and preparing food for their soldiers. With their own troops at hand, they were afraid of nothing.

Quanyou and the other wounded were brought into the caves. Wei Gang posted the guard. Dayong wanted to write something, but the peasants' tiny oil lamp didn't offer enough light. He called to a messenger:

"Bring that enemy flashlight we picked up."

The messenger's right hand was wrapped in bandages. He approached Dayong and said, "It's broken."

Dayong sat with his head leaning against the wall. He closed his eyes slightly. "Didn't you find a couple of candles too?" he asked.

The messenger lit a candle and held it, sitting down on Dayong's left.

Dayong hadn't been writing half an hour, when the young messenger fell asleep. His head dropped against Dayong's shoulder and the candle went out.

"What are you doing?" Dayong shouted.

The messenger hastily re-lit the candle. But before Dayong could write two sentences, the youngster again dozed off, and again the candle was extinguished.

Although very annoyed, Dayong didn't awaken him. He rubbed his eyes hard and punched himself in the head a few times, then went to look after the wounded.

Four wounded men were lying on some hay. Quanyou sat with his back against the wall, very straight from the waist up. His eyes were shut. There was an intense expression on his face, as if he was taking a brief rest after a forced march but was ready to spring into battle at a moment's notice. Dayong's heart stirred with compassion. He wanted to hug him and cry, "Quanyou, I'm with you all the way!"

Instead, Dayong looked into his eyes and pleaded, "Say something. It's me, Dayong."

Quanyou set his jaw and didn't utter a sound.

Dayong's face was close to Quanyou's shoulder. "Speak. You see, we're still together. We'll always be together." Dayong squeezed his hand, as if afraid Quanyou would leave him.

Quanyou was sweating profusely and muscles worked within his face. The scar on his cheek seemed particularly livid. He ground his teeth but he refused to let a single cry of pain escape him.

"Can you hold out?" Dayong asked anxiously.

"Yes." The reply came through clenched teeth. With his eyes Quanyou indicated that he wanted something to bite on. Dayong put a handkerchief in his mouth, and Quanyou clamped down on it hard. Then he just sat, motionless and silent.

Dayong felt very unhappy. But he was not so worried after examining Quanyou's wounds. None of them seemed to be dangerous.

Dayong looked the other wounded soldiers over. Some had had their trouser leg ripped off from the knee down; the clothing of others was riddled with bullet holes; the uniforms of a few had been burned by fire and gave off a scorched acrid smell.

Zhiqing had been killed, Dayong mused, but how could Quanyou and Erzi have jumped off the cliff and lived through it? Actually, this was no different from any of the other "miracles" that often happen in battle. The cliff surface was not absolutely sheer. When they jumped, they landed on an abutment, and rolled from there to a lower projection, until they finally reached bottom. If they had taken a straight drop, of course, they would have been finished.

Zhiqing had died because, in his fall, his head had struck a rock.

Lying with the wounded on the straw in the cave, Dayong gazed out at the black night. He could hear the wind moaning through the gorge and the cries of wild animals. He thought of Wei Gang and the others out on patrol, of the fierce fighting he had been through that day, of the commander and comrades of Ninth Company.... His head still resounded with the noise of battle and he felt a bit unsteady.

Night deepened; the air grew chill. In the gorge, leaves on the trees rustled in the wind.

Dizzy, Dayong closed his eyes. Just then Jinshan entered and asked him:

"Remember old Uncle Li Zhende?"

Dayong hastily sat up. "Of course. What about him?"

"I just went down to the stream to draw some water. The countryfolk gathered round me asking all sorts of questions. All of a sudden I saw Uncle Li's old woman — Li Yushan's mama. You know, commander, that old lady saved my life!"

"Ah. I wonder what she's doing here."

"That's what I was thinking myself."

Someone raised the grass door curtain and entered the cave. Dayong stood up and saw that it was a thin little old lady. She looked as if the least wind could blow her over. Behind her came a few other women. One or two were carrying infants. Jinshan supported her on his arm, saying, "This is our battalion commander, old mama."

Dayong sat down on the ground and the old lady sat down, cross-legged, opposite him. She gazed into his face and stroked his hand.

"So you're Dayong. Yushan's father talks about you often. Ai, wherever we run to, the White army follows us! I haven't much time left in this world; why can't they let me live in peace!"

Dayong patted her hand lightly. He didn't know how to make small talk and comfort her.

She pointed at a woman of about thirty. "That's my eldest girl. She's married and lives on Jiuli Mountain. A few days ago I moved in on her with the whole family. Nobody thought the Whites would come to this place. But not three days went by before those murdering Whites showed up! Commander, how much longer is this terrible war going to last?" There was a worried expression on the old lady's face.

Dayong invited the old lady and the other women to sit on the dry wheat stalks piled on one side of the room. "How is old Uncle Li?" he asked.

"Still alive. He's the one who brought us here. Then he went off with the guerillas. He said he'd come back every couple of days to see how his family is getting on, but there hasn't been a sign of him since he left! Grain is short. We never know where our next meal is coming from. Eight out of ten families have had to let their stoves go cold. I sent someone for him this morning, but — what's the use? He's only living from day to day himself. Ah, life's hard on a woman my age. I just can't talk to the man. Before you can say three words he loses his temper — blows out his beard and pops his eyes! The things I have to put up with. You probably know Yushan, my eldest boy, commander. I haven't had any news from him for a long, long time; I can't imagine where he's gone to. My second son — we call him 'Man-man' — he's joined the army too. These youngsters, going to all sorts of places, running into all sorts of dangers.... My own flesh and blood ... it's hard on a mother...." The old lady wiped her eyes.

A woman in her late twenties, suckling a baby, interrupted. "When you get started talking, Ma, you never finish. The commander's been fighting all day. He's tired."

"What's wrong with my saying a few words to the commander? He's one of our own army. He's no stranger." Turning to Dayong, the old lady pointed to the woman who had tried to stop her chatter. "That's Yushan's wife, and that one —" She indicated a girl about twenty, "— that's my Man-man's bride. They've only been married five months. What is this world coming to!"

The old lady, the women, the kids — all were looking at Dayong as if waiting for an answer. He felt these countryfolk were his own dear relatives. They needed his protection.

"It won't be much longer," he said soothingly to the old lady. "The enemy are going to collapse any minute now. And don't worry about Yushan. He's smart. Nothing's going to happen to him. You say Man-man's joined the army? Old Uncle Li asked me to try and find him. What's his regular name? If you can tell me that, I can inquire for you. I'll let you know as soon as I hear anything."

The old lady thought a moment, then asked the young bride, "What's his official name?"

Very embarrassed, the girl slipped behind her sister-in-law. "Li Yuming," she whispered.

"Li Yuming?" cried Jinshan. "Has he got a mole on his upper lip?"

Startled and pleased, the old lady demanded, "Where did you see him?" The gaze of all of the women, including "Man-man's" bride, was fastened on Jinshan's face.

"Why didn't you say so before!" said Dayong. "Yuming is in our First Company!"

The old lady woodenly stretched forth her hands. "Can it be true?" she asked herself.

"Jinshan," said Dayong, "relieve Yuming on guard duty and let him come down here. Tell Wei Gang to keep the guards on the alert."

Dayong walked outside the cave and stood on the edge of the bluff. He looked at the sky and the valley before him. It was very dark. He could hear a stream gurgling through a ravine. A wind from the desert howled over the mountain-top, and trees on the slopes bent and groaned beneath its force.

He held his hand over his waist to hold down his billowing coat. The air was chilly. Autumn is coming, he thought.

After making a tour of the guard posts, he returned to the cave and lay down on the hay. He had a lot on his mind. He had already sent a soldier and three local peasants to try and make contact with Company Nine, but there was no news from them as yet. Dayong could hear Li Yuming and the women talking a mile a minute in the adjoining cave. Just as he was thinking of joining them, a tall man silently entered the cave and walked up to the lamp. Only then did Dayong recognize him. It was old Li Zhende.

Dayong jumped to his feet. "I never thought I'd see you here, old uncle!"

The old man's eyes were more sunken than ever, and he looked very tired. But his determined stubborn disposition hadn't changed a bit. "How are you, Dayong?" he said. He squatted down on his haunches, filled his pipe and struck a flint. "I seem to run into you wherever I go."

"It's I who run into you wherever *I* go," laughed Dayong.

Old Li sucked his pipe noisily. "There are plenty of odd places we'll be going to yet. You see what a forsaken spot we've had to hide in." After a silence, he went on, "I've come to take these people to the south valley. Things change fast these days. No one knows what place is really safe."

"I received your message, old uncle."

Old Li didn't reply. Like all people well on in years, he thought slowly. He continued talking of what interested him. "The enemy won't leave us in peace, but they're nearly finished now. I've just come back from Yushan's place. They've got nearly three thousand guerillas gathered north of Qingjian. They say when the retreating enemy pass their way, they're going to give those KMT troops a hard time."

"That's right, we're going to finish off the whole lot of 'em. We're going to show them that north Shaanxi isn't very healthy for them, that the north Shaanxi people can't be pushed around."

The old man seemed to have thought of something important. His face brightened and his eyes shone. "Dayong, a few days ago in that north valley, Yushan saw our Chairman Mao!"

Dayong's chest expanded. "Really? Really?" he cried excitedly.

"Really. Chairman Mao even talked with Yushan for a while. Yushan, whenever he tells about how he saw Chairman Mao, he's ready to burst with joy!"

5

DROWSILY, Dayong closed his eyes, and at once he was plunged into the heat of battle. An enemy soldier came rushing at him with a bayonet. He dodged, and grappled with him. They rolled on the ground, back and forth, until they rolled over a cliff. Down they fell . . . down . . . the wind whistling in Dayong's ears. He opened his eyes, his heart beating wildly.

A very different scene met his eyes. Yuming's mother and three other old ladies were sewing and mending the PLA men's torn pants and cloth shoes in the lamplight. Old mama — Yuming's mother — was mending the gaping holes in the toes of Dayong's shoes. The cloth was encrusted with mud, providing stiff opposition to the needle. The old lady kept sharpening it by sliding it through her grey hair. Her eyes were weak, and from time to time she rubbed them. Whenever the flaxen cord dropped out of the needle, it took her several attempts before she could thread it again. But she went on patiently, stitch by stitch. Once in a while she stopped and gazed long at the wounded, listening to their groans. Her old eyes shone with limitless love and pity.

Rifles began cracking to the north, and in the north-west cannon thundered.

An icy autumn wind blew in through the reed curtain hanging at the door of the cave. The tiny flame of the oil lamp flickered unsteadily.

Occasionally, the old women exchanged a few words, their heads close together, their voices low so as not to disturb the sleeping soldiers.

Dayong lay motionless, watching them, peaceful and relaxed in the family atmosphere. Somewhere, he seemed to hear the sound of a spinning wheel. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep. He ached with fatigue and his head felt ready to burst, but sleep refused to come to him. He thought of the many grey-haired mothers he had seen in his travels — on the plains of north China, in the Daqing Mountains, on the banks of the Yellow River and the Changjiang. Mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers — people suffering great hardships, people who had lost their sons, their husbands — gave their lives to save him, Dayong, sacrificed themselves to save a Communist.

It was very late. Yuming's old mother tidied her sparse locks and said to her companions, "Walk softly. Don't wake the children. They're completely worn out."

The old women tiptoed out of the cave.

On the north side of the mountain a rifle cracked twice.

"The enemy!" A young woman carrying a baby and a cloth-wrapped bundle came running into the cave. She could hardly catch her breath. "They've spotted these caves! Old Lord of the Heavens!"

Dayong was on his feet in an instant. "Don't worry, folks! Even if the sky should fall, you've got our shoulders to hold it up!" He hurried out of the cave with drawn pistol.

At the door, he collided with a soldier. "The comrades of Company Nine have arrived, commander," the man announced. "And those dozen men of ours who've been watching the prisoners have come too, bringing the prisoners with them. Those shots you just heard were fired at them by mistake."

The night before, after shaking off the enemy, Company Nine tried six times to make contact with Dayong, without success. At dawn, discovering that Dayong and the others were pinned down by the enemy, they tried to relieve them, but each time were beaten back. With the sun coming up, they had no choice but to hide in the secluded ravine with the dozen PLA men guarding the prisoners. That night, the commander of Company Nine sent out a squad to look for Dayong. They searched in vain for hours. Now, at the first cock's crow, while moving to a new hide-out, Company Nine had, quite by accident, run into Dayong and his men.

It was a joyous reunion. The PLA men had so much to say to one another, you'd think they had been separated a year or two, instead of only one day and one night.

Ploughing through the happy crowd, the commander of Company Nine strode up to Dayong and saluted, his chest high. "Commander Dayong," he cried. He was too overcome with emotion to say any more.

Wei Gang, who had hurried down from the mountain, shouted as he entered the door, "Commander Wang, you're all here? How did you do it?"

Dayong pointed at the old man standing beside him. "Comrades, see who else is here. Old uncle Li Zhende!"

Wei Gang turned around quickly and took old Li's hands in his own, gazing at the old man's broad face, his tall frame, his deep flashing eyes, his grey streaked beard.

"You get more hale and hearty every time we meet!"

"How can I compare with a young ox like you?" Old Li pulled back his hands from Wei Gang's grasp. "You're crushing my old bones into powder! Ah, it's still the youngsters who've got the strength!"

"Wei Gang," said Dayong, "Our First Company's Li Yuming is old Uncle Li's son. Uncle Li's family is here too."

"Ho! What a coincidence! When Jinshan told about it just now, I didn't know whether to believe him or not."

Slowly, the darkness before dawn faded. Dayong bid farewell to old Li and the countryfolk, and led his men and the prisoners in a wide swing towards the Jiuli Mountain district.

6

IT was the seventh day of the delaying action on Jiuli Mountain. Sixty thousand enemy troops were halted by two or three thousand indomitable PLA men. Not only were the enemy unable to advance a step, but their heads were bleeding from ramming them in vain against the wall. Aside from their casualties in battle, the enemy also suffered heavily from illness and desertion.

The KMT army fought with the frenzy of desperation. A fierce battle had been raging from dusk of the previous day until dawn this morning. Entire battalions, entire regiments, flung themselves against our unit, in wave after wave. We fought back with munitions we took from the hands of enemy prisoners, from the hands of their corpses. Every command post, every man, regardless of rank, took direct part in the fighting, shooting, counter-attacking.

The mountain on our left flank had been captured by First Battalion the night before. The enemy was now bombarding it with the fire power of a whole brigade. It was assaulted by enemy battalions, enemy regiments. By noon, First Battalion had thrown back seven heavy attacks.

But the enemy never let up. With their own machine-guns trained on them from the rear to prevent any turning back, enemy soldiers, in no semblance of formation, again swarmed up the mountain. The battle was growing hotter by the minute.

Political instructor Zhang Pei led the battalion's counterblow, sweat streaming down his thin face, his eyes grim, blue cords standing out in his neck. He swung his pistol and shouted the order to charge the KMT soldiers who had broken into our position.

After our men had again driven back the enemy, Zhang Pei and Chengde, political instructor of First Company, dropped into a trench. Zhang Pei's shirt was open at the front, his pistol still in his hand. His strong firm movements, his militant expression, the mud and sweat that grimed his face, presented a very different picture from his usual affability.

"We're giving the enemy a real drubbing!" he said to Chengde. Looking at his Mauser, he added, "This is a fine pistol. It fired eight clips in a row without jamming once."

"You'd better put a little more oil in the barrel."

"Tommy-guns are even better than pistols. I want to use a tommy-gun, next time. When the enemy charge, you can mow 'em down beautifully."

"Say, your neck is bleeding."

Zhang Pei wiped away the blood with his hand. "It's nothing. If we hold out another half hour, it'll be dark and ve done our job." He shoved the pistol under his belt and took up his field glasses. "The enemy's moving again. Look. That mountain in front to the left. . . ."

There was a series of sharp explosions as several heavy mortar shells exploded nearby. Smoke and flying earth swallowed up the two political instructors.

Zhang Pei flung up one hand and dropped the field glasses, buckling at the knees.

Chengde threw his arms around him. Zhang Pei's face was deathly white. He leaned against Chengde's shoulder, slowly sliding down, too weak to hold himself up.

Holding him tightly, Chengde made a careful examination. There were no wounds on Zhang Pei. He had been knocked out by the concussion. Chengde called to him anxiously. His eyes half shut, Zhang Pei made no reply. Chengde tightened his grip. He had the feeling if only Zhang Pei wouldn't fall to the ground, everything would be all right.

Suddenly, Zhang Pei stiffened, his hands clutching his heart. "Hold me up," he said.

Leaning with both arms against the breastwork of the trench, Zhang Pei stared fixedly in the direction of the enemy. His lips were trembling. "Hold out another half hour . . . hold out another half hour. . . ."

The enemy launched a final attack before dark. Chengde led the men into battle.

They smashed back the enemy's last assault. It was already dark. Most of the men were bleeding from the nose and ears as a result of the incessant pounding of shells. Their faces were black with smoke.

Jumping into the trench, Chengde found Zhang Pei still standing against the breastwork, his head down.

Chengde lifted Zhang Pei's head. "Instructor! Instructor!"

Zhang Pei was mumbling, "Hold out another half hour . . . hold out another half hour. . . ."

At the wave of Chengde's hand, stretcher bearers came running. They hurried Zhang Pei off to the field hospital.

Regimental political commissar Li Cheng walked through the ravine on his way from Jiuli Mountain to the village where regimental headquarters was located. His uniform was mud-spattered, the sleeves and the trouser legs ripped by brambles. As he neared the village, he met Dayong, returning with the temporary battalion.

Dayong told him briefly what had happened during the several days they were operating behind the enemy lines. "It's certainly true, 'A beaten army is like a collapsing mountain,' " said Dayong. "The enemy have nothing to eat. Their men are deserting in droves. Just along the road on the way back, we picked up over two hundred prisoners."

"Your harassing behind the enemy lines was a big help to our troops taking the enemy's frontal assaults. Our armies on the central plains are pouring it on hard, and Chiang Kai-shek is screaming like a madman for Hu Zongnan to pull soldiers out of here for reinforcements. 'Send relief to the central plains?' says Hu. 'I'm not even sure if I can save myself!' Hu and Chiang will never forget Jiuli Mountain as long as they live!"

The two men walked side by side along the stream through the ravine, guards and messengers following alertly behind them.

It was so dark you couldn't see your hand before your face. There was intermittent firing. Enemy rocket flares illuminated distant mountain-tops. A streak of flame split the murky darkness of the north-east sky, and artillery fire rolled and thundered.

"They're scared to death of night fighting," said Li Cheng. "As soon as it gets dark, their headaches begin."

The lapping stream flowed towards the east. The two men strolled slowly beside it.

"After you left, the brigadier kept telephoning to ask whether you had returned yet," said Li Cheng. "He was very worried that you'd run into trouble."

"Yes, he's always saying I'm too young. Has he lost any weight lately, commissar? Try and make him pay more attention to his health. I've been thinking of talking to him myself, but I haven't got the nerve. I'm afraid he'll 'tell me off' again!" Dayong chuckled.

Li Cheng felt his wrists. "You're thinner."

"I don't see much flesh on your face either." Dayong paused. "Many of our men have night blindness. They can't see in the dark."

"How about you?"

"I'm worse than any of 'em."

"I don't believe you. You're a very healthy young man." Li Cheng smiled. "Come with me to regiment. I'll have them give you a basin of hot water to soak your feet, and then you can get a good night's sleep."

"No, thanks. I want to go directly to battalion."

"Naturally you want to go to your own home first. All right, go ahead. I want you to write up the heroic deeds of Wei Gang, Quanyou, Erzi and the others and send it to me. It will be an education to us, an education to our men!"

"Is it true that instructor Zhang Pei has gone to the hospital?"

"Yes."

Dayong stood beside the stream and gazed at the darkly looming Jiuli Mountain. He could picture Zhang Pei's thin face, his black sparkling eyes, his friendly smile, his gallant boldness in battle. . . .

"Oh, Brigadier Chen has ordered that we march at midnight," Li Cheng suddenly recalled. He clenched his fist before his chest and made a swift punching movement downward with it. "Hurry back to your battalion, Dayong. We've got a new mission: To ambush and harass the enemy every step of the way, to bury them here in the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region!"

7

A CHILL autumn wind, blowing in from beyond the Great Wall, was a swirling fury of sand and leaves and withered grass as it chased across the endless mountains.

After our forces withdrew from Jiuli Mountain, the enemy, like water released through the sluice gate of a dam, gushed south along the Xianyang-Yulin Highway. What had once been armies, brigades, regiments, battalions, today had become disorganized hordes. They were men running for their lives. They collided with one another, shot at one another, cursed, fought, plundered. . . . If a man fell, though he might scream for help, thousands of heedless feet would trample over him, crushing him to pulp. In narrow ravines, men and animals at times jammed to a standstill, and a gang would use its tommy-guns to blast open a path. Infantrymen pushed artillery horses over cliffs to clear the way. Officers, waving their pistols, rushed back and forth on their prancing steeds, trying to restore order, only to be carried along in the great flood of routed soldiers.

Flee, run, never mind where to, just keep going. Run, never stop, though your heart is straining to the bursting point. . . .

In the endless mountains, in the ravines big and small, everywhere were flowing streams of panic-stricken soldiers, everywhere were the bandits American imperialists had trained. . . .

Rain poured down, drenching them to the bones, making them slip and stumble with every step, causing hundreds to skid over the edges of narrow paths and fall to their death.

Nowhere did Hu Zongnan's army see a single peasant. Not a grain of millet could they find, not a cauldron, not a handful of fodder. Even the bowls and chopsticks had disappeared from the deserted peasant homes. Except for door and window-frames which the soldiers burned for firewood, nothing remained that was of any use to the enemy.

Artillerymen slaughtered the animals that pulled their caissons to fill their bellies. Foot soldiers attacked the gunners and tried to snatch the food for themselves.

Braving the dirty weather, three or four enemy transport planes airdropped sacks of hard tack. These proved to be serious bones of contention among the various enemy units. Whenever the planes appeared, different gangs tried to cordon off the designated airdrop area with machine-gun fire. There were bloody clashes over every sack of mouldy, stinking hard tack. For the sake of a piece of hard tack no bigger than the palm of his hand, many a KMT soldier lay eternally eating the yellow mountain earth.

The enemy had to walk gingerly to avoid land mines. By some perverse luck, those who feared them most were usually the ones who trod on them. And the moment someone set off a land mine, the news spread like wildfire.

Tails between their legs, their spirits dragging on the ground, the KMT cut-throats feared an ambush every time

they heard the rustle of the leaves in the trees. They mistook the sound of pelting rain for machine-gun fire; clumps of high grass were suspected of concealing artillery positions. Every stone in the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region seemed to fling itself against them. Every cave looked like a cavernous mouth, opened to eat them. Every mountain was a volcano ready to erupt. At any moment, the PLA might surge out of a crack in the ground and destroy them.

Before and behind, to the left and to the right, in the big gorges and the narrow ravines — everywhere were snipers, everywhere were thousands of women, children, old men, armed with hoes, sickles, shears, choppers, sticks, waiting to make the enemy pay in blood.

The endless mountains of the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region were ablaze with the fury of the people's vengeance.

In the past, the guerillas operated only at night. If a band of thirty or forty men killed or captured a dozen enemy in the course of a raid, it was considered quite a victory. But the last few days, the guerillas roamed freely from mountain to mountain in broad daylight. Capturing over a hundred KMT soldiers in a single assault became a common occurrence.

There were about three hundred men in the guerilla unit under Li Yushan's command.

While the main force of the PLA was cutting across country to get to a position where it could meet the enemy head-on, in the district south of Jiuli Mountain, Yushan led his men in harassing the enemy's rear. The guerillas planted the path of the enemy with land mines during the day and launched swift surprise raids against their flank at night.

A fine drizzle fell from the inky night, and the whistling autumn wind was chill.

Yushan led his men up a mountain and looked around. Enemy campfires burned on a distant mountain-top. The guerillas set off in the direction of the glow.

After crossing one mountain, they suddenly heard the voices of enemy soldiers. They must be outpost guards, thought Yushan. At his order, the guerillas' hand grenades flew in unison. In the flaming burst, enemy soldiers were seen tumbling into the ravine. Six KMT men were taken prisoner. The enemy on the opposite slope immediately extinguished their campfires and opened up with their machine-guns.

Several of the guerillas threw themselves down and responded with light machine-guns, rifles and tommy-guns before Yushan's shouts could stop them. Angrily he pushed his second in command.

"You birds can't see a damn thing, but you shoot off a lot of good bullets, blind." He turned around and cried, "Mortars! Fire a few rounds at that mountain-top opposite."

The enemy were firing for all they were worth now. Glaring flare rockets hung in the sky, lighting the heights far and near.

Yushan saw an enemy detachment feeling its way down the mountain. He sent a few guerillas to plant some land mines in the enemy's path, then led his troops up the mountain to their rear. When they reached the other side of the mountain, he took count. Two of the men who had been sent to lay mines were missing. He vented his annoyance on the mine-layers' squad leader.

"You plant a couple of mines, and manage to lose two men before they even go off," he said sarcastically.

Lying motionless on the damp ground, their ears cocked, their eyes staring, the guerillas waited for the thunder of the land mines.

As the yelling, shooting enemy detachment came down the opposite slope, there suddenly was a series of explosions. Dizzy, the KMT soldiers rushed for the nearby trenches and fox-holes. But as they landed on the mines planted there, another chorus of deafening bursts followed. Red flames shot into the night sky. Enemy soldiers uttered wild screams of pain and fear.

The guerillas clapped and whistled and cheered. Yushan stamped in exasperation.

"Pipe down! They'll know we're not regular army — making a racket like that!"

Flashlight beams darted here and there on the opposite slope. The enemy were probably collecting their dead.

At Yushan's prompting, one of the KMT soldiers who had just been taken prisoner called timidly, "My name is Li Zhanbiao. The PLA treats prisoners well. Surrender, brothers —"

A volley of enemy rifle fire drowned out his voice.

Enraged, Yushan directed three mortars to pour twenty rounds into the enemy position. The KMT detachment's manners improved immediately.

Yushan put the megaphone to his mouth and roared out a brief report of the war situation on all the major fronts. In conclusion, he shouted:

"The officers get rich, but what does the ordinary soldier get out of it? Sitting on top of a mountain with an empty stomach in a pouring rain! Come on over, brothers! Come over and we'll let you go home!"

From the enemy side there was only silence. They were probably thinking it over.

At Yushan's signal, the guerillas broke into song:

The autumn wind rises, the autumn wind's cold,
In thin summer uniforms it's bleak and chilly.

The autumn wind rises, the autumn wind's cold,
Sell your life to old Chiang? Don't be silly!

A few men accompanied the chorus on mellow wooden flutes. The mournful tones of the instruments floated through the cold mist. The commanding officer of the enemy detachment on the opposite slope raged and cursed, demanding that his men open fire. Not one of them moved.

"Good," said Yushan. "It worked!"

Late that night, he led the guerillas across a few mountains westward to a place where they made camp.

The next morning, talking and chattering, the guerillas crowded into the cave occupied by Yushan. Outside, a man was singing:

Green grass shoots, only an inch high,
Sing a little ditty to relax and be gay. . . .

Jokes and banter flew back and forth.

"This is no tea-house," said Yushan. "What are you hanging around here for?"

"You mean to say we can't come into our own headquarters?"

"Just look at him scowl! Like he'd been drinking bitter medicine!"

Yushan concentrated on the problem at hand: Two of his men were still missing. They probably had been nabbed by the enemy. He shouted to a squad leader:

"I told you to send out a search party for Old Four and Calf. Have you done anything about it?"

Outside, someone cried, "So you're back, eh? Yushan thought you two had disappeared up some old cow's rump!"

Calf entered the door and leaped up on the brick bed. His shoulders swaying in time to the rhythm, he sang:

I wanted to go home and see my love,
But was so busy fighting I couldn't get away. . . .

Old Four came in and squatted on his haunches beside the oven, almost too tired to breathe. It was too much of an effort for a man his age to keep up with a young fellow like Calf!

"Where've you been all this time?" demanded Yushan. "I thought the enemy had got you."

"What if they had?" said Calf.

" 'When things go well, even a carrying pole may burst into blossom; when things go bad, even ginger tastes flat,' " said Old Four mournfully. "I've had nothing but bad luck, lately. I went home a couple of days ago and that old woman of mine got all in a flurry and spilled the cooking oil. Now look what you've done, I says to her, you'll see, before three days pass, my luck will go bad. And, sure as the sun rises in the east, it happened — last night, when we were laying those land mines, I ran into trouble."

"When are you going to learn not to be so long-winded, old brother?" said Yushan impatiently. "Come to the point. Did the enemy get you?"

Old Four wiped his mouth. "They were almost on us when we finished planting the mines. Me and Calf ran north. Crossing a mountain, I nabbed a stray enemy soldier. The guy kept kowtowing so fast I thought he was going to dislocate his back. 'I'm a good man,' he yells. 'The Old Lord of the Heavens knows!' 'Get up,' I says. 'I want to ask you a few things.' But he won't get off his knees. He says, 'I'm a conscript; they dragged me into the army. When a leaf drops from a tree, I'm afraid it'll hurt somebody; I've never done wrong to man or beast.' When I hear he's a conscript, my heart goes soft. But the minute I take my eyes off him, the guy makes a dash for it, yelling his fool head off! The next minute there's a whole gang of 'em, closing in on me and Calf. I ran so fast I missed my step and tumbled into the gorge. Calf got caught. It was real dangerous for him!"

"You're a great one!" cried Yushan. "You get away but you leave Calf behind."

"He left me behind, but I soon left the enemy behind too," said Calf.

What had happened was the enemy had spotted Calf in the pre-dawn light. When Calf saw that escape was impossible, he threw the bolt of his rifle into the gorge. Pointing their guns at him, the KMT soldiers demanded, "What did you do that for?"

"Why not?" he replied. "Truman sent it as a gift. It didn't cost me anything."

An enemy soldier beat him to the ground with his rifle butt. The eighteen-year-old youngster sprang to his feet again, his fists clenched, eyes flashing, ready to fight.

The captain of a KMT reconnaissance company intervened. "Bring him along," he said. "Don't kill him yet. We can use him."

"Your guns don't scare me," said Calf. "We border region people don't scare easily. If you act more polite, maybe we can talk things over."

The captain patted his shoulder. "Do you know what marks the guerillas make to identify the places they've buried mines?"

"I don't remember the marks, but I can recognize the places they've planted 'em anyhow."

"Fine. You be our guide, you won't lose anything by it. We pay well. Say, do you know where there's any grain hidden?"

"Up that gorge, turn to the right on the left side, there's two hundred catties. I'll show you."

Summoning three soldiers, the captain walked with Calf to the edge of the steep slope of the gorge. "Over there," said Calf, pointing. The captain leaned out to look. Calf clutched him around the waist and cried, "If I'm not going to live, you're going along with me!" The two men rolled down the slope. Before the surprised and frightened captain could recover his wits, Calf picked up a rock and dashed his brains out. Then the young guerilla took the captain's pistol and ran down the gorge, the KMT soldiers blazing away after him with their rifles.

Calf climbed the mountain opposite and rested. Though every bone in his body ached, he stood up and shouted mockingly to the enemy on the other side of the gorge, "Give up your guns and I won't kill you. Otherwise, I'll send you all to your graves!"

The infuriated enemy responded by giving chase, shooting as they came. Bounding nimbly over the heights he knew so well, Calf soon left them behind. Although their stomachs were growling with anger, the KMT soldiers could only watch, pop-eyed, while the young guerilla disappeared.

As Calf paused in his recital, Yushan brought his hands together with a resounding clap. "Nice work, Calf. I'm going to report this to the Border Region Government."

"That's not all," said Calf. "When they chased, I ran. When they stopped to catch their breath, I stopped too, and gave them a little serenade. I sang:

Riding a white horse, carrying a gun,
Brother goes with the Communist Party.
He'd like to go home and see his beloved,
But he's too busy smashing old Chiang Kai-shek!"

8

THE troops had just finished the second night march since Chen's brigade had left Jiuli Mountain when the order spread through the ranks: "Get ahead of the enemy again!"

When the sky lightened, the men lost their drowsiness. Singing, laughter, chatter spread along the marching column.

Machine-gun fire was heard as the sun reached the rim of the eastern mountains. As if by signal, this was followed by rifle and artillery fire and the sound of heavy explosions.

The PLA men listened. They tried to estimate, according to their experience, how far away the battle was and what its size was.

Dayong knew that the enemy had again fallen into a PLA ambush set by his own column up ahead. He looked at his men. Like him, they too wore a tense, excited expression.

About half an hour later, they could hear intense bombardment. A short time later the firing had dwindled to the desultory rifle fire that always marked the end of a battle.

The PLA men flowed through the narrow valley like a mountain torrent; the horses and big gun-carrying mules among them were like bits floating in a turbulent stream.

At noon, the unit turned off into a small valley east of the town of Yongpingzhen. This valley could truly be called secluded. There wasn't even the shadow of a peasant. A stream flowed softly through the valley; fresh breezes stirred the weeping willows along the banks. For the first time in days the sun showed itself, crimsoning the undulating hills.

Somewhere, people were singing. The PLA men looked around in surprise. Though they could see no sign of the singers, their voices kept coming nearer.

From the mountain to the west, a voice rang out:

Endless mountains, endless valleys,
Mountain linked to mountain, valley to valley.

On the mountain to the east, someone picked up the refrain:

Clear flowing water, green verdant hills,
North Shaanxi has no end of fertile fields!

"Who can that be, feeling so good?" the PLA men wondered. By then the two voices had joined together in song:

With the first month comes the brand New Year,
In north Shaanxi we had Liu Zhidan so dear.
Liu Zhidan was an honest leader,
He led his army into Hengshan County
Wanting communism with all his heart.
The second month brings the winds of spring,
And up from Jiangxi came Mao Zedong.
Strong and powerful he came our way,
Flying through the sky,
With millions of soldiers in his wake.

The PLA men were entranced. "Well sung," they shouted as they marched. "Give us another!"

In the flash of an eye, from the slopes on either side of the road, people came running, skipping down, singing, shouting, whistling, crowding along the sides. It was then the PLA men finally recognized them: They were the guerillas. In their ranks were old men, and some women, but most were young stalwarts in their twenties. The young women had hand grenades stuck in their waist bands. The young men wore white towel turbans on their heads; around their waists were cartridge belts. Rifles they had captured from KMT soldiers were slung across their backs. Several men carried

American tommy-guns. The older men evidently were the leaders. Perhaps in their youth they had been among the Red Army soldiers led by Liu Zhidan!

The guerilla girls called jestingly to the PLA men, "Do you know that the shoes on your feet and the grain that you eat are all things we got the people to contribute? But just look at you — marching by with never a word of thanks!"

"What are you laughing to?" shouted the young men guerillas. "You think we don't amount to much? We've captured a lot of machine-guns and big artillery pieces with mouths as wide as bowls!"

"We wish you victory!" the PLA men cried happily. "Long live the people of the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region!"

The guerillas applauded wildly and yelled, "Long live our regular army! We'll fight the enemy side by side!"

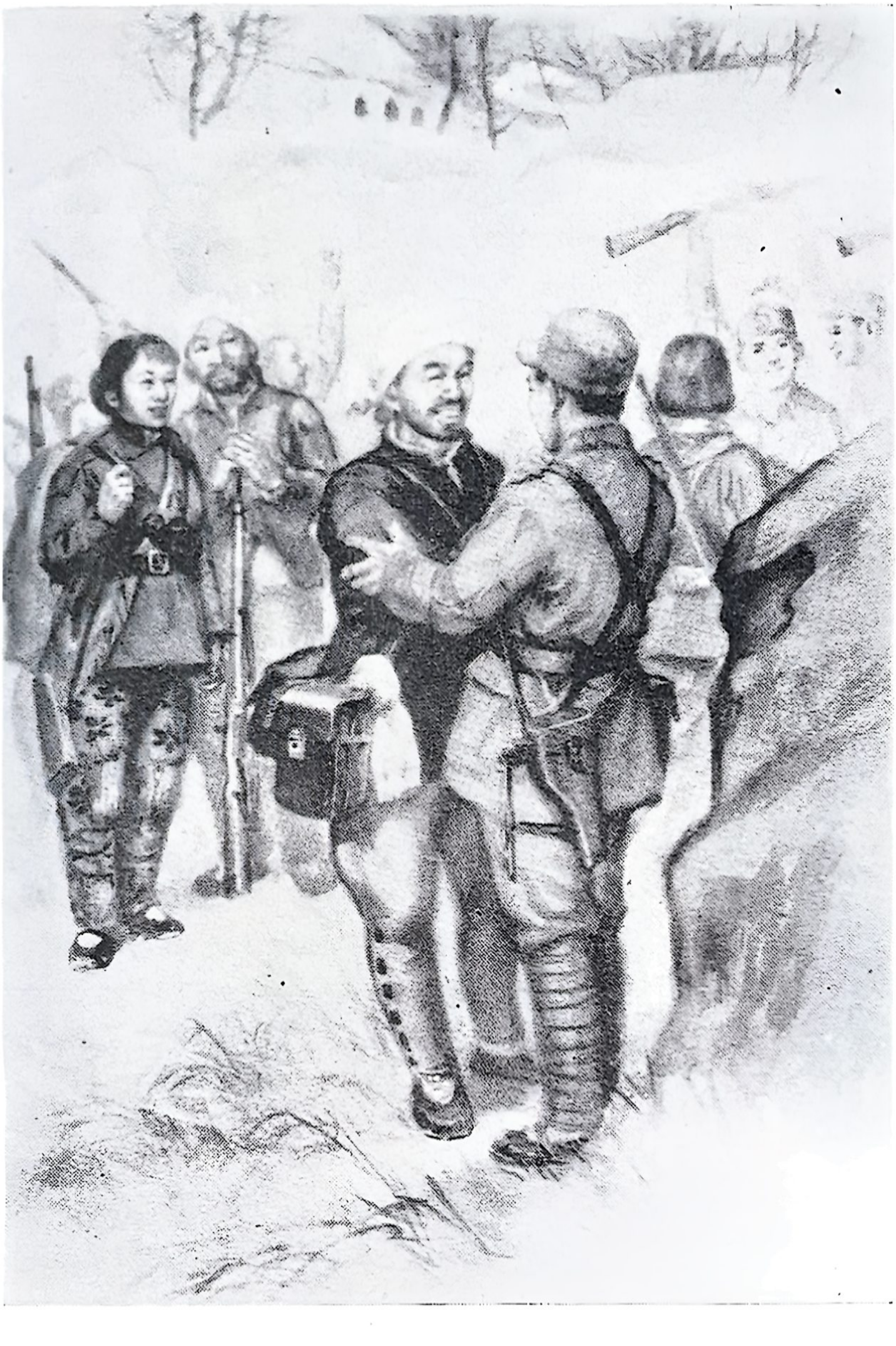
"Dayong! Where are you looking! Dayong!" A man came running up, waving his hand. He was very tall, and on his head was a white towel turban. He wore a padded jacket of black cloth, and brown KMT breeches. His right hand steadied the leather dispatch case on his belt as he ran; his left hand held down the bouncing Mauser pistol.

Who can that be? Dayong wondered. The man's broad face, heavy brows, high cheekbones, deep-set eyes and black bristly beard reminded Dayong of old Li Zhende.

The tall man put his hand on Dayong's shoulder and chuckled, "So the regular army looks down on the guerillas? That kind of thinking has to be straightened out!"

Seizing the other's arms in a vice-like grip, Dayong cried delightedly, "Li Yushan! Just look at you — a face full of whiskers! Why don't you burn them off?"

"Let go of me, brother. Are you trying to kill me?"



They shook hands and walked along together. "These last couple of weeks have really been something," said Yushan. "I see even you have picked up a head wound!"

"We've all been busy, all right. But who can relax in times like these? Yushan, up at Jiuli Mountain I met your whole family. They sure are fine people. . . ."

Yushan deluged Dayong with questions. How was the old man, the old lady, the kids? He particularly wanted to know whether the children were thinner. . . .

"I haven't seen them for two months, brother. They must be having a hard time." Yushan rubbed his chin and added meditatively, "I suppose I shouldn't complain. At least I know they're all right . . . Dayong, whenever I meet you, I always ask for the same thing: Give me another cartridge clip for my automatic."

Dayong gave him two.

Weighing them in his hand, Yushan said happily, "Brand new. It takes the regular army to capture stuff like this."

"Are you short of arms and ammunition?" asked Dayong.

Yushan clapped him on the shoulder. "Things have changed since last year. Not only have we got rifles now — American tommy-guns are no rarity either. But bullets for automatics are still hard to get."

"Yes, a lot of things have changed. The enemy are running south as fast as they can go, sorry they've got only two legs apiece."

"They don't give a damn about anything except saving their necks. It's the day of reckoning for those bastards and they know it."

"But no matter how they run, we're always ahead of them. North Shaanxi highways wind around the mountains through the valleys and gorges, and the enemy sticks to the main roads. But we cut directly across country."

"People say north Shaanxi hasn't three feet of level ground. That's no exaggeration. It's a fine place for a revolution. Mountains all around. Perfect for ambush attacks. Am I right, Dayong?" Yushan pointed to a place a mile or two ahead. "That's Chusijiao. One of your regiments just fought an engagement up there. They did a beautiful job. One, two, three — wiped out an enemy battalion, captured over twenty vehicles and six tanks."

Dayong calculated on his fingers. "In the past half month the enemy have lost about ten thousand men, but they've covered less than a hundred miles. Huh! A turtle could crawl faster than that."

"The funny thing is they think they've left our main force far behind with that hundred miles. They never did imagine there's an ambush waiting for them at Chusijiao."

"They wouldn't believe it if you told 'em."

Yushan related to Dayong about how the guerillas had helped the regiment in the battle that just concluded.

"You guerillas are all right," Dayong said admiringly.

Yushan gave him a hearty slap on the back. "We've got a long way to go, but we manage to give the enemy a real headache anyhow." He leaned close to Dayong and whispered, "I saw General Peng Dehuai at the Chakou Gorge last night. He asked me for a few dozen men to act as guides. Dayong, I think there's a big battle shaping up in the Chakou District."

9

AT heavy cost, the enemy managed to retreat four or five miles a day. By the middle of September, they had only reached the outskirts of the town of Yongpingzhen, about

forty miles north-east of Yanan. The village of Chakou is seven miles south of Yongpingzhen. To get to Yanan, the enemy had to pass through Chakou.

General Peng Dehuai spread a huge snare in the Chakou District. When the enemy, tens of thousands strong, marched into this area, our troops closed in on them as tightly as iron bands.

The fierce battle of Chakou commenced.

From every surrounding mountain, our men charged into the Chakou District. In the gorges behind the mountains, thousands of guerillas, militiamen, stretcher bearers and many, many peasants were waiting. The crowds were livelier than at any temple fair.

When lightly wounded men came rounding the slope, peasants immediately rushed to meet them. When stretcher bearers brought down the seriously wounded, they were at once surrounded. Women, young and old, hurried to give the wounded a drink, to speak to them words of comfort.

On the river flats, peasants helped the army cooks prepare food and carry grain, laughing and shouting cheerily all the while.

Two of the regiments of Chen's brigade came into battle from the north. Zhao Jin's regiment was held in reserve on a mountain-top behind the northern ridge. On battle alert, they posted their guards and in various ways helped out units at the front.

Dayong, who had recently been promoted to commander of the First Battalion, led a detail of men down the mountain into the gorge. There they loaded cases of hand grenades on their shoulders. Just as they prepared to go back up the slope, dozens of peasants crowded around and pulled the cases away from them. The peasants insisted on doing the carrying. Half-way up, with the cases on their backs, the peasants were strafed by enemy planes. But they never quit. Now taking cover, now walking on, they doggedly persisted until they had delivered their loads.

Guerillas were continually coming down to report the news. "Our forces have just taken another height!" One man told ten; ten told a hundred. Word flew from mouth to mouth, faster than the wind.

A group of people crowded around Dayong to ask, "How many of the enemy have we encircled?"

"Two army and two division commands, and five brigades. Liu Kan and Dong Chao, those famous bandits, are also surrounded in Chakou. In other words, the enemy's entire mobile strength in north Shaanxi."

"Comrade," a woman asked, "what do you mean by mobile strength?"

"The scurrying rats of Hu Zongnan's bandit army."

"Praise the Old Lord of the Heavens!" cried an old lady. "They won't be tormenting us any more!"

Suddenly, people were running to a point further down the river flats. They crowded around something, the size of the crowd growing bigger and denser by the minute.

Dayong went over to see. An enemy colonel and five or six hundred men had been brought in as prisoners.

As Dayong turned, he bumped into Yushan. "Nice battle," he said with a grin.

"Beautiful," cried the guerilla leader. "We've got the whole enemy force pinned down."

"Plenty of peasants here today. If they're well organized, it'll be fine."

"I'm in charge of the guerillas and the militiamen. District chief Liu is leading the stretcher bearers. My father is in charge of the peasants; he's gone off to look after a

grain shipment. Just listen to the racket those women are making. One woman is a cymbal; with two, you've got a whole damn orchestra! I can control the men all right, but I can't do a thing with those women!"

"Your father is here too?"

"Couldn't keep him away. The old man is full of fire!"

Pushing his way through the crowd, Dayong heard someone call his name. As he turned, an old man grasped his hand.

"Old uncle, how are you?" said Dayong. "So we meet again!"

Li Zhende's brows were all grey now; his eyes were more deeply sunken and the cheekbones in his square face stood out sharper than ever. He wrung Dayong's hand warmly.

"I've come to support the front again. Couldn't you guess? How is our Man-man getting on?"

"You mean Yuming? Fine. He's making fast progress. He's an assistant platoon leader now."

Pleased, the old man brushed his beard with the sleeve of his jacket. "That so? Young devils. You don't see 'em for three days and they change a lot!"

About three hundred sack-laden donkeys came up the gorge, their peasant drovers crying "drr. . . drr. . . ."

"Is that village ahead where we deliver the grain?" one of the drovers called to old Li.

"Where did you get all that grain, old uncle?" Dayong asked.

"From the liberated peasants of Shanxi. They delivered it to the banks of the Yellow River. We picked it up there and relayed it here. I've often thought if I'm lucky and live to see victory I'd like to take a trip all over China. I'll only have to say I'm a north Shaanxi man and I'll have friends wherever I go!" The old man laughed till the tears came to his eyes. It was the first time Dayong had ever seen him laugh like that.

The old man opened the bundle tied to his waist and took out a pair of cloth shoes. "Do you remember, Dayong?" he asked. "When we met at Jiuli Mountain, Man-man's ma — my old lady — gave you this pair of shoes as you were leaving. But you! — just before you left, you hid them under the straw. Man-man's ma was very annoyed with you. This time I brought them along again — I thought I might run into you. Take them, Dayong. Take them for a keepsake."

Dayong laughed. "The old lady always thinks of us. How is she? And the rest of the family?"

Old Li sighed and shook his head. "Everyone else is all right, but Yushan's ma — my old woman — she's gone now...." The old man's brow knit with pain. Lowering his head, he murmured, "My old woman ... my old woman...." His shimmering silver beard trembled.

Dayong drew his breath sharply. "No, it can't be," he protested.

His eyes on the ground, old Li pulled the pipe out of his belt and slowly filled it, more as if giving himself something to take his mind off his sorrow than actually wanting to smoke.

"She's gone, son, she's gone. The enemy caught her in the valley when they were retreating from Jiuli Mountain. They demanded grain. Dayong, where would she get grain? The enemy are savages, they're not human! They set fire to her hair.... When the call went out in our neighbourhood to help at the front, the government comrades didn't want to let me come. Said I was too old, that it was hard for me to get around. I insisted, Dayong. I want to see these enemy dogs with my own eyes!"

Dayong stood motionless. Old mama, all her life too

tender-hearted to kill even a mouse. A flaming fury burst in Dayong's heart, obliterating all his pain and sorrow.

Old Li took him by the arm. "Come. Let's go to First Company. I want to see Man-man. I won't talk to him very long. I still have work to do!"

The battle raged on into the night.

A misty drizzle fell. The firing grew more intense.

At dusk on the third day, Zhao Jin's regiment went into action. Dayong led First Battalion in an assault on the last mountain in enemy hands.

Black clouds were piling up in the sky. Thunder, rumbling in the distance, blended with the boom of the cannons.

After capturing the enemy's last mountain stronghold, Dayong and his men pressed down towards the gorge. From all sides, he could hear the sound of PLA bugles. Tens of thousands of the enemy were being squeezed into the Chakou Gorge.

This was the final stage.

Lightning flashed across the dark sky. Thunder crashed and rain began pouring down.

First Battalion knifed into Chakou Village. The place was full of routed enemy soldiers, pack animals, abandoned arms and equipment....

The whole enemy army had disintegrated. Thousands of soldiers simply sat down and waited to be taken prisoner. Dayong blocked off the mouth of a small ravine. It was jammed with KMT men who had discarded their weapons....

Firing, bugle calls, shouts of "Lay down your arms and live," hissing rain, torrents roaring through the mountain gullies, bursting artillery shells — made a bedlam of night in the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region.

10

AFTER the battle of Chakou was concluded, General Peng Dehuai ordered the main force of the North-west Field Army to pursue the shattered enemy fleeing towards Yanan, and directed the column of which Dayong's battalion was a part to cut over and take up positions south of Yanan.

The only road from Yanan to Xian — the Xianyang-Yulin Highway — runs almost due south from Yanan, going through Laoshan, Ganquan and Lochuan, and then on to Xian.

It was the mission of the column to prevent the enemy from fleeing from Yanan down this highway to Xian. The column set off on a forced march south from the Chakou District. A steady flow of troops and stretcher bearers moved forward through the gorge.

General Peng stood on a mountain-top and watched them go. He was dressed in an old, simple soldier's uniform, with patches on both knees, and wore home-made cloth shoes.

Twenty yards to his left stood the commanding general of Dayong's column, together with Brigadier Chen, brigade commissar Yang and several other officers.

"We nearly ruined Hu Zongnan in this last battle," said the column commander.

"If it hadn't been for that damned rain we would have finished them off completely," Chen agreed.

"Anyhow, we've turned his whole mobile force in the north-west into a heap of scrap metal," said commissar Yang.

"When Chiang Kai-shek's bandits took Yanan, victory celebrations were held in every city the Kuomintang occupied," Chen recalled. "The dogs thought they had found the pill that would give them eternal life. Now, how do they feel? Ha, ha, in six months we kicked the stuffing out of one of their strongest allies — Hu Zongnan!"

"The North-west is a headache to the enemy now," said the column commander. "The nation-wide military situation is giving them an even worse headache."

General Peng walked over. "The enemy's in bad shape," he agreed, "but we shouldn't celebrate too soon. Our main job is to keep after them so hot that they can't catch their breath. . . ." He peered off into the distance. "We said long ago that Yanan would turn out to be a burden to Hu Zongnan's gang, a heavy burden that would crush the life out of them. The enemy are discovering the truth of this, today. They like to cast down this burden, but it's too late."

An officer handed a radio message to General Peng.

The general read it, then stared off into space, gazing at the boldly soaring eagles. Finally, his eyes settled on a distant mountain. Some of his troops were crossing that mountain at this very moment.

"Which one of your units is marching through the gorge now?" the column commander asked Brigadier Chen.

"Li Cheng's regiment. See, there he is."

"Tell him to come up here."

A few minutes later, regimental commissar Li Cheng arrived following a messenger.

"Has your First Battalion passed yet?" the column commander asked him.

Li Cheng looked at the troops marching through the gorge. "This is our headquarters' unit. First Battalion is bringing up the rear. It hasn't passed yet."

"When it does, send for Dayong."

Li Cheng dispatched a messenger to summon Dayong. In no time at all, Dayong came galloping up the slope.

"He makes a brave sight, doesn't he?" commended the column commander.

Dayong leaped from his horse and saluted the commanding officers.

"This is Comrade Zhou Dayong," the column commander said to General Peng.

General Peng gripped Dayong's hand firmly and appraised him for several seconds with serious, affectionate eyes. He questioned Dayong in detail about his health, his work, and the state of the men's morale.

As Dayong saluted General Peng and turned to leave, General Peng stepped forward and shook his hand, then shook hands with each of the other officers.

Dayong rode back to his marching battalion. His sleek black horse held its head high, frothing at the bit, shaking its mane like a lion. Pricking up its ears, the horse neighed shrilly and reared. Dayong pulled the head of the cavorting steed to one side and, while the horse was prancing in a tight circle, jumped off and handed the reins to a groom. He joined the ranks of First Company, shaking hands with the men.

There were over a hundred men again in First Company now. In addition to the veterans who had returned after recovering from their wounds, more than half the men were new. The rookies included volunteers from Shanxi Province — peasants who had been given land of their own in Land Reform, battle-tested militiamen of the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region, and former enemy soldiers who had taken part in "Tell Bitterness" meetings. Dayong was proud of his old company. The fighting First had never lost a battle.

Although Dayong had been promoted to battalion commander only a few days before, the men of First Company felt as though he had left them for years. They hailed him loudly; all the old veterans seemed very eager to talk with him. To Dayong, it was like coming home. How many bitter struggles he had been through with the men of First Company, how many miles they had tramped together! Together they had been drenched by rain, together they had starved, shared the same pot of thin gruel. Many a man of First Company had slept with Dayong under the same padded jacket. In stress of battle he had cursed them, but the most vital things in his life and theirs had always been shared in common — the joy and merriment, the solemn vows, the heroic sacrifices, the heart-broken tears.

Many men beside whom he had fought shoulder to shoulder had fallen in battle. They were people with various dispositions, people with different ways of looking at things. Now they were gone, leaving their desires, their ideals, their cause, to be carried on by the living. Dayong could clearly picture the departed — strong men, precious men, yet so simple and unassuming.

"Comrades," he called, "in a couple of days Tiger Wang and Ma Quanyou are coming back. Tiger's going to be your political instructor; Quanyou will be company commander. With those two, plus Jiangguo and Changsheng, all working together in First Company — what could be sweeter!"

Changsheng, the new assistant commander, grumbled, "I'm miles from being able to handle this job!" His head tilted to one side, he glared in the stubborn manner Dayong knew all too well.

Jiangguo, the new assistant political instructor, had a request. "Now that you're working in battalion, don't forget you used to be our leader. When emergencies come up, just call on First Company!"

"Ho! So you want me to play favourites, eh? A fine thing to say! But seriously, Jiangguo, have the men break out all our company's banners."

Seven or eight banners quickly appeared, bearing such inscriptions as "Bold and firm," and "Fierce as a tiger in attack, steady as the mountain of Taishan in defence." Soaked by the rain, baked by the sun, scorched and blackened by the fire and smoke of battle, the banners were badly faded. Some were spotted with black bloodstains. How many times had the fighters braved artillery fire to plant those banners on enemy fortifications! How many times had a man picked one of those banners from the hand of a fallen comrade, stepping over his body to carry it forward!

Dayong and the men gazed at the banners flapping in the breeze. They thought of savage battles, glorious deeds, bitter trials. To the new soldiers these banners gave some feeling of the courage of their company, some understanding of the revolutionary struggle.

Dayong mounted his horse. It shot like an arrow along the side of the marching column, its hoofs seeming barely to touch the ground. The men of First Company gazed after Dayong admiringly.

11

LATE on the night of the nineteenth of September, the PLA men were passing through Ganguyi, a small town about twenty-seven miles due east of Yanan. They were going to cross the Yanshui River to the south into a long valley leading to Yanan.

Brigadier Chen and commissar Yang stood on some steps by the side of Ganguyi's main street. About a dozen staff officers, guards and messengers were with them.

Chen watched the infantry, artillery, the munition-laden pack animals flowing by. He heard the tramp of feet, the clank of metal, the thud of horses' hoofs. The men must be thinking a lot, going through this place in the middle of the night, Chen said to himself.

Six months before, to the day, Yanan had been occupied by the enemy. On that day, he, Chen, had led his brigade through this very town. It was in a ravine outside this town that the men had received the news of the evacuation of Yanan; they had wept and vowed: "We will defend the Central Committee, we will defend Chairman Mao, we will defend the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region, and we will take back Yanan!" Many of the men who made that vow had already given their lives to ensure its realization.

There had been battle after battle in those six months. Yes, marching and fighting for half a year, the men of the PLA had given their sweat and blood, had suffered pain and hardship, so much, so much. . . .

Commissar Yang got down from the steps. "Old Chen," he called, "during the Anti-Japanese War, I passed through here on my way from Yanan to the front, and later on my way back to Yanan to study. This little town has probably seen at least half of China's revolutionary fighters."

Chen only nodded. He remembered the nineteenth of March when his brigade was marching through this town. He and regimental chief of staff Wei Yi had said the same thing. Today Wei Yi was sleeping the long sleep in the yellow soil of north Shaanxi. A feeling of sadness stole over Chen. . . .

Then his eyes fell on the quickly marching men. Most of them were discussing the town.

It had changed. The enemy had been through it several times, burning, killing, looting, reducing it to ruin. All of the doors and wooden window-frames had been burned by the KMT army for fuel. Weeds on either side of the street grew as high as a man's waist.

In these tangled thickets, suddenly lamp lights gleamed and peasants who had been too old to run away tottered out and gazed at the moving column. "Our army's come back at last!" they said. Tears running down their cheeks, they told their story, the same wretched story the PLA fighters had heard a thousand times — of sons killed, daughters raped and murdered, grain plundered, houses burned to the ground. . . .

Chen nudged commissar Yang gently with his shoulder. "Come on, let's go."

Preparing to mount, Yang put one foot in the stirrup. "America's running dogs always bring death, disaster, plague. . . ." His voice was low and trembling.

After taking Nanniwan, a village about twenty miles south-east of Yanan, the column turned towards Laoshan, seventeen miles due south of Yanan and right on the Xianyang-Yulin Highway.

A fine rain fell from an overcast sky. The mountain summits were obscured in mist.

Chen's brigade emerged from a path in a forest and gathered on a mountain clearing. There were many new soldiers. The brigade's strength was up to well over five thousand.

The men sat crowded together. Their uniforms were drenched. Looking down, they could see white clouds rolling along the waist of the mountains.

Commissar Yang stepped forward and swept the assembled fighters with his piercing eyes. "We're going into battle, comrades!" he said.

The men's faces brightened and their hearts beat joyfully.

"Our main force has chased the routed enemy from Chakou to the outskirts of Yanan. There are enemy strongholds in

the outskirts, but we've taken them all. Comrades, a month ago Hu Zongnan's bandits went up to Mizhi to 'mop up' our army. There were around a hundred thousand of them then. Today, less than half were able to flee back to Yanan."

Lifting their rifles high, the men shouted: "Wipe out Chiang Kai-shek's army! Take back Yanan!"

"Liberate the whole North-west!"

"Liberate all China!"

"Comrades, we hear that Chiang flew to Xian yesterday in a great hurry. But when he saw what serious danger Yanan was in, he got in his plane and flew right back to Nanjing. Comrades, never mind about Chiang Kai-shek, even if Truman himself flew to Yanan, he wouldn't be able to save Hu Zongnan!"

The applause and cheers of the men shook the mountains and rang through the valleys.

"Comrades, one of our armies has marched into the Dabie Mountain area. It has liberated many county towns. Another army has taken over a dozen county towns along a two-hundred-mile stretch of railway between Tongguan and Loyang. Hu Zongnan wants to pull out of north Shaanxi and rush down to defend Xian and support his units on the central plain. Our job is to cut his road at Laoshan and not let him get down there. Comrades, in 1935, Comrade Liu Zhidan and his companions-in-arms led the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army against the Kuomintang bandits in Laoshan and wiped out an enemy division. The spirit our Red Army showed in Laoshan then we're going to show again today! Comrades, we're going to take Laoshan, and bury the shreds of Chiang Kai-shek's and Hu Zongnan's army in Yanan!"

"Capture Laoshan!" shouted the men.

"Show the spirit of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army!"

Dayong, his assistant battalion commander Wei Gang and political instructor Chengde sat in the first row, their eyes fixed on the brigade commissar, listening intently to his words. For their battalion had been given the task of taking Laoshan — gateway to Yanan.

"We'll smash the sons of bitches," Wei Gang growled to Chengde. He turned to Dayong. "Let me lead an assault detachment, what do you say?"

Dayong made no reply but looked around at the men of First Company seated behind him. Assistant political instructor Jiangguo, assistant company commander Changsheng, First Platoon leader Jinshan, Second Platoon leader Yuming, young medical orderly Sanniu.... All were breathing fire, ready to show their stuff.

"The wind is rising, commander. If we're going to fight, let's get started," said Wei Gang. "Why look only at First Company? On your toes! Here comes the brigadier!"

The brigadier was drenched from head to foot. Tattered shoes were tied to his feet with strips of cloth. He was badly in need of a haircut. Rain water dripped from his bearded face. He stood quietly, solemnly, then raised his head and looked at the men.

He came two steps nearer. This time as always, gazing at the men, Chen felt his entire being charged with an irresistible force. Every one of those men was a giant, an epoch-making hero. He could see in them a miraculous potential of which others were not aware.

Chen's eyes met the eyes of many of the men, and when that happened a current of warm affection flowed between them like a sparkling electric charge. Every man felt that Chen was looking at him personally. The veterans especially were sure Chen could read their every thought and emotion. They had been through so much together — camping out in the downpour, gnawing ears of maize, enduring hunger, marching bare-footed, one battle after another, through smoke and flame, facing and defeating death time and again....

The brigadier wiped the rain from his face, then scraped his wet hand against the bark of a tree. "You're soaking wet, comrades," he observed sympathetically. "You've fought bravely in battle, comrades, you've been hungry, cold, you've marched without shoes...."

Yes, the men remembered these things. They had been through them all — in the deep mountain forests, in the deserts beyond the Great Wall.

"Trouble can't get us down!" yelled the fighters.

"The Central Committee and Chairman Mao have been in it with us together!"

Birds nesting in the trees around the clearing, startled by the shouts, burst into a flurry of flight, shaking the drops from the leaves and sending them pattering down like a rainstorm.

"Comrades, nowhere in the world are there men who love their people and the land of their birth more than we Communists. Some say, 'What's so good about north Shaanxi? It's nothing but a lot of bare mountains!' But we fight with our lives for every inch of its soil. Some say the deserts are just empty sand. But we're willing to wage fierce battles in those deserts. For we know that every inch of Chinese land has been watered with the sweat and blood of our heroic ancestors struggling to convert it from a wilderness. In the last twenty years, the men of our People's Liberation Army have travelled all over China, with nothing to carry them but their own two feet. We've seen that this vast land of ours has limitless riches. But we've also seen that in spite of our natural treasures, millions of people are suffering poverty, hunger, oppression, misery.... But isn't this the very reason we've taken up arms to fight for our class, for the right of people to live decent lives? . . . Let the American imperialists and their running dogs beware. The great children of a great nation will never be slaves! We'll never bend the knee!"

As he spoke, he extended his palms towards the ground, as if pushing down all the iniquities and ugliness of the old society. Or he shoved them out directly in front of him, as if forcing over any obstacle in the path ahead. These gestures seemed to indicate: Whether big mountains or wide rivers — they'll have to get out of our way.

When Brigadier Chen spoke of the enemy's crimes and the suffering of the people, he breathed hard and ground his teeth; his chin trembled and he looked at the men with flashing eyes. The fighters followed his every move, responded to his every word. For he was expressing what was in their hearts. He reminded them of the agonies of the old society and they thirsted for vengeance. They longed to win a future that was peaceful and bright.

"Comrades," cried Chen, "the running dog of American imperialism, that poisonous snake, Chiang Kai-shek, is coming to the end of his days. But his death throes are going to be violent. We must strike the enemy hard and keep on striking until we've finished them off for good! . . . We're going into battle again, comrades. Chairman Mao and General Peng have ordered us to smash open Laoshan — the door to Yanan!"

"Fight like a proletarian!" shouted the men.

"Take Laoshan!"

"Make Yanan the enemy's grave!"

Brigadier Chen waved his hand. "Chairman Mao and General Peng are waiting for news of our victory. May you always be victorious, comrades! Long live the Chinese Communist Party, long live Chairman Mao, and long life to you — comrades!"

Cheers, shouted slogans, brought pulsating life to the wild mountain forest.

That day the cooks outdid themselves. They boiled many bushels of sweet corn, and issued two ears to each man. The PLA soldiers nibbled them hastily in the short time that remained before setting out.

A soldier came up with three ears of corn and presented them to Chen, saying, "We have two apiece, but as a special token of welcome our company cook has prepared these three for you."

"Ask him why I get one more than everybody else. It's not fair."

Actually, three of the men had pooled half their ration and sent it to the brigadier. When Chen heard this, he searched everywhere for the donors to return their corn. But, of course, they were nowhere to be found.

As the three commanders entered the grove, they ran into Dayong, who saluted, then stood to one side, wiping the rain from his face.

Chen looked at Dayong. "Our Young Old Revolutionary," he said to Zhao Jin and Li Cheng with a laugh. "One of the best officers in your regiment!"

Zhao Jin turned serious eyes on Dayong. "He certainly is."

"Comrade Dayong," called Chen, "your unit is the main force in the attack on Laoshan. We'll be expecting to see some pretty fighting from you today."

Absolutely erect, Dayong gazed at the brigadier without batting an eye. "The commanders can rely on us. We definitely will take Laoshan." Dayong seemed to be pondering something.

War has taught him to think things out, Chen mused. "I'm sure you will," he said aloud.

Chen looked at the black clouds in the sky over Yanan. He listened, as if trying to hear the boom of cannon in the city's outskirts. Turning, he looked first at Dayong, then at Zhao Jin and Li Cheng.

"You must hit the enemy with all you've got and take Laoshan," he said. "But that doesn't mean everything will be smooth sailing from then on. Tell your men: The day to retake Yanan, our citadel of democracy, has come. The day to liberate all of the North-west as far as the Pamir Plateau, has come. Tell them the road ahead is long; the closer we get to final victory, the more bitter the struggle is going to be. Let them always remember: Fighters trained by the Communist Party are invincible."

Chen turned to Dayong. "Go. I have the fullest confidence in you and your men. Go into battle with heads high."

Dayong, instructor Chengde and Wei Gang led their men forward. Moving swiftly out of the wooded valley, they drove against Laoshan, high on a towering mountain....

Brigadier Chen, commissar Yang, Zhao Jin, Li Cheng and several staff officers watched from a height, as Dayong and his battalion were attacking the mountain, then they swung their field glasses towards the north.

There, over the Great Wall, a storm had risen. With booming thunder and crackling lightning, it bore down irresistibly, sweeping across the forests, swirling over the mountains around Yanan, across the whole Yellow River region — where the Chinese people had fought so many battles in the thousands of years of their history — rushing and hurtling into the distance beyond....

About the Author

Du Pengcheng, whose pen-name is Sima Jun, is a professional writer and deputy chairman of the Xian Branch of the Chinese Writers' Association, who was born into a poor peasant family on March 28, 1921 at Su Village in Hancheng County, Shaanxi Province. In 1938, he went to Yanan and studied at a school affiliated with the Anti-Japanese Military and Political Academy, devoting his spare time to writing. Upon graduation, he stayed in the countryside of the Yellow River Valley where he was involved in the struggle against the Japanese invaders. He later studied at Yanan University before being assigned to work in a factory. In 1946, he started his career as a correspondent. He joined the army and went to the front in 1947 as a reporter of the Xinhua News Agency. In 1949, he was the editor-in-chief of the Field Branch of Xinhua News Agency under the First Army of the North-west Field Army. During the War of Liberation, his experience of living and fighting with the PLA men laid a solid foundation for his later writing. Unfortunately, most of his war reports, stories and articles during the period were lost except for a script, "Camping", which was published by the North-west People's Publishing House and survives. Leaving the army in 1951, he served as a correspondent for the Xinhua News Agency and later as deputy of its Xinjiang Branch. From 1949 to the end of 1953, he completed his novel, *Defend Yanan*, with the campaign in China's North-west as its theme. In 1954, he was transferred to the Xian Branch of the Chinese Writers' Association. In the years after 1954, Du Pengcheng wrote a number of short stories including *Con-*

struction Site at Night, *An Ordinary Woman*, *Crossing Linguang Gorge at Night*, and *Brilliant Course*. In 1958, he published the short novel *In the Peaceful Days,* which has been republished in many editions. The monthly magazine, *Yanan,* carried two of his short stories in 1977: *The Footstep of the History* and *Informal Talk on Going to the Life*. Du Pengcheng's works are noted for their philosophic sense, romanticism and great enthusiasm. The famous writer Mao Dun once said: "The characters in Du's works are bold and vigorous as if sculpted by a huge axe with powerful strokes. He shows his characters in conflicts to create a tense, but heated atmosphere." Du Pengcheng suffered cruel persecution under the Gang of Four. *Defend Yanan* was ordered burned and the author was forced to stop writing for more than ten years. Since the end of the "cultural revolution", Du has devoted himself to writing long novels. Besides *Defend Yanan,* his other works include *Young Friends,* a selection of short stories; *Literary Sketches*, a selection of prose; and *Brilliant Course*, a selection of short novels and stories.

保卫延安

杜鹏程著
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WITH the 1947 People's Liberation Army's campaign in China's North-west as its background, *Defend Yanan* follows the adventures of a company of veteran PLA soldiers during the three-year War of Liberation which ended in October 1949 with the founding of the People's Republic of China.

How was it possible for the PLA to destroy in three years the Chiang Kai-shek's forces of over eight million men? What was the Chinese people's attitude towards this fierce civil war? What type of men were the PLA fighters? How did they live? What went on in their minds? How did they feel about their cause, the fighting and their companions in battle?

Defend Yanan is able to answer these and other questions about the War of Liberation through the experience of its author, Du Pengcheng, who as a war correspondent for the Xinhua News Agency followed a PLA company in the North-west Theatre. Well-received in China upon its publication in 1953, *Defend Yanan* continues to attract readers through its vivid portrayal of a group of PLA men whose characters bring to life one of China's most important historical periods, the War of Liberation.

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